

PETER FREEMAN, INC.
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MEL BOCHNER

BIOGRAPHY

- 1940 Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
Lives and works in New York City
- 1962 BFA, Carnegie Institute of Technology, Pittsburgh

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2019 Philbrook Museum of Art, Oklahoma. Amazing! Mel Bochner Prints From The Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer and His Family Foundation
(14 October 2018 – 6 January 2019)
- 2018 ADDA: The Art Show, New York. Mel Bochner, Paintings 1981 – 1984
(28 February – 4 March)
- Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio, United States. A Measure of Humanity
(22 June – 16 September)
- 2017 Michele Didier, Paris, France. Singer Notes. (8 September – 10 November)
- Gladstone Gallery, Brussels, Belgium. Language is Not Transparent.
(7 September – 10 November)
- Peter Freeman, Inc., New York, NY. Voices. (19 April – 24 June)
- 2016 Ikeda Gallery, Berlin, Germany. Mel Bochner.
(17 December 2016 – 18 March 2017)
- 2015 Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, South Hadley, MA.
Illustrating Philosophy (21 July – 20 December)
- Galeria Hispanica, Mexico DF, Mexico. words, words, words... (26 May – 24 July)
- Marc Selwyn Fine Art, Los Angeles, CA. Mel Bochner. (18 April – 30 May)
- Craig F. Starr, New York, NY. Early Drawings. (3 April – 22 May)
- 2014 Simon Lee Gallery, London, England. Going Out of Business. (14 October –

14 November)

Jewish Museum, New York, NY. Mel Bochner – Strong Language. (2 May – 21 September)

2013 Museu Serralves, Porto, Portugal. Mel Bochner: If the Colour Changes. (12 July – 27 October)

Peter Freeman, Inc., New York, NY. Proposition and Process: A Theory of Sculpture (1968-1973). (10 May – 12 July)

Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany. Mel Bochner: Wenn sich die Farbe ändert. (7 March – 23 June)

2012 Marc Selwyn Fine Art, Los Angeles, CA. Theory of Sculpture: Fontana's Light. (17 March – 27 April)

Quint Contemporary Art, La Jolla, CA. words... (3 March -- 14 April)

2011 Peter Freeman, Inc. New York, NY. Mel Bochner: Photography Before the Age of Mechanical Reproduction + Some Drawings from the Sixties + Recent Reflections and Recursions on Dis / Tension and Crumpling. (17 November 2011 - 14 January 2012)

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. In the Tower: Mel Bochner. (6 November 2011 - 8 April 2012)

2010 Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco, CA. Photographs and Not Photographs: 1966-2010. (9 September - 30 October)

Galerie Nelson-Freeman, Paris, France. Mel Bochner. (29 May - 11 September)

Marc Selwyn Fine Art, Los Angeles, CA. New Works. (6 February - 20 March)

2009 Lawrence Markey, San Antonio, TX. Recent Drawings. (23 October - 4 December)

Metroquadro, Rivoli, Italy. Il dissidio sulla parola. (8 October - 14 November)

Rhona Hoffman, Chicago, IL. Blah, Blah, Blah. (13 May - 26 June)

2008 Peter Freeman Inc., New York, NY. Mel Bochner. (27 March - 24 May)

Marc Selwyn Fine Art, Los Angeles, CA. Color as Shape/Shape as Color: A Wall Painting and Related Drawings from the 1970s. (12 January - 1 March)

2007 Domaine de Kerguéhennec, Bignan, France. (30 June - 30 September)

Galerie Nelson-Freeman, Paris, France. 1998 – 2007: Painting, Sculpture

- and Installation. (3 March - 20 April)
- Quint Contemporary Art, La Jolla, CA. Velvet Paintings. (12 January – 10 February)
- Galleria Il Gabbiano, Rome, Italy.
- 2006 Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL. Mel Bochner: Language 1966 – 2006. (5 October 2006 - 7 January 2007)
- Wynn Kramarsky, New York, NY. Mel Bochner: Drawings from Four Decades. (25 April - 24 June). Exhibition travelled: Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL (9 July - 30 September); Weatherspoon Art Museum, University of North Carolina, Greensboro, NC (15 October - 23 December); San Diego Museum of Art, San Diego, CA (14 January – 18 March 2007)
- Peter Freeman, Inc., New York, NY. Thesaurus Paintings. (25 April - 1 July)
- Spartus Institute, Chicago, IL. The Language Barrier. (1 January 2006 – 30 March 2007)
- 2004 Regina Gouger Miller Gallery, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA. Dialogue in a Landscape. (8 October - 12 December)
- 2003 Barbara Krakow Gallery, Boston, MA. Genetic Space(s): Paintings Drawings, and Prints, 1992-1996. (25 October - 9 December)
- Musee d'Art Moderne et Contemporain, Geneva, Switzerland. Mel Bochner - Measurement Paintings.
- Galleria Il Gabbiano, Rome, Italy. Recent Works.
- Sonnabend Gallery, New York, NY.
- 2002 Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA. Forum: Mel Bochner: Photographs, 1966 – 1969. (12 October 2002 - 12 January 2003)
- Akira Ikeda Gallery, Berlin, Germany. New Works and Recent Works. (4 June - 31 August)
- Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, MA. Mel Bochner: Photographs, 1966 – 69. (16 March - 16 June)
- Michael Carlos Museum, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.
- 2001 Lawrence Markey Gallery, New York, NY. Numbers, 1966 - 2001 (November – December)
- Bound & Unbound, New York, NY. (November – December)

- Akira Ikeda Gallery, Nagoya, Japan. (10 March - 28 April)
- Grant Selwyn Fine Art, Beverly Hills, CA.
- Galleria Primo Piano, Rome, Italy.
- 2000 Sonnabend Gallery, New York, NY. (November – December)
- Grant Selwyn Fine Art, Beverly Hills, CA.
- FRAC Bourgogne, Dijon, France. Mel Bochner Measurements: Works from the 1960s/1990s.
- 1999 Centro Municipal de Arte Hélio Oiticica, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.
- Akira Ikeda Gallery, Yokosuka, Japan.
- 1998 Lawrence Markey Gallery, New York, NY. Mel Bochner: Drawings 1966-1973. (April – June)
- The Drawing Center, New York, NY. Parasite On View: Mel Bochner, Working Drawings and Other Visible Things on Paper to Be Viewed as Art. (21 February – 4 April)
- Betsy Senior Gallery, New York, NY.
- 1997 Musee d'Art Moderne et Contemporain, Geneva, Switzerland. (July)
- Cabinet des Estampes du Musee d'Art et d'Histoire, Geneva, Switzerland.
- 1996 Sonnabend Gallery, New York, NY. (November)
- La Societe des Exposition du Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, Belgium. Thought Made Visible: 1966 – 1973. (1 March - 12 May). Exhibition travelled: Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich, Germany (26 June - 8 September)
- Galerie Tanit, Munich, Germany.
- 1995 Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT. Thought Made Visible: 1966 – 1973. (14 October - 31 December)
- Betsy Senior Gallery, New York, NY.
- 1994 Galerie Arnaud Lefebvre, Paris, France.
- 1993 Sonnabend Gallery, New York, NY.
- Betsy Senior Gallery, New York, NY.

- Gallery 360, Tokyo, Japan.
- One Five, Antwerp, Belgium.
- Museo Storico della Liberazione, Rome, Italy.
- 1992 Galerie Vega, Liege, Belgium.
- Thomas Segal Gallery, Boston, MA.
- 1991 SteinGladstone, New York, NY.
- Studio Casoli, Milan, Italy.
- The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, OH.
- 1990 David Nolan Gallery, New York, NY.
- Galleria Primo Piano, Rome, Italy.
- Galerie Jahn und Fusban, Munich, Germany.
- Barbara Kornblatt Gallery, Washington, D.C.
- Roger Ramsey Gallery, Chicago, IL.
- 1989 Sonnabend Gallery, New York, NY.
- The Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD.
- 1988 Martina Hamilton Gallery, New York, NY.
- Paul Cava Gallery, Philadelphia, PA.
- David Nolan Gallery, New York, NY.
- Greene Gallery, Coral Gables, FL.
- 1987 Sonnabend Gallery, New York, NY. Selected Works 1969 – 1986. (14 February - 7 March)
- Center for the Fine Arts, Miami, FL.
- Galerie Montenay, Paris, France.
- 1986 Kunstmuseum, Luzern, Switzerland. (April – June)
- Galleria Primo Piano, Rome, Italy.
- 1985 Sonnabend Gallery, New York, NY.

Janet Steinberg Gallery, San Francisco, CA.

Carnegie-Mellon University Art Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA.

1984 Roger Ramsay Gallery, Chicago, IL.

1983 Yarlow Salzman Gallery, Toronto, Canada.

Daniel Weinberg Gallery, San Francisco, CA.

Pace Editions, New York, NY.

Carol Taylor Gallery, Dallas, TX.

Sonnabend Gallery, New York, NY.

1982 Sonnabend Gallery, New York, NY.

Abbaye de Senanque, Gordes, France.

1981 Texas Gallery, Houston, Texas.

Daniel Weinberg Gallery, San Francisco, CA.

Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX.

1980 Sonnabend Gallery, New York, NY.

1979 Art in Progress Gallery, Düsseldorf, Germany.

1978 Sonnabend Gallery, New York, NY.

Daniel Weinberg Gallery, San Francisco, CA.

Schema Gallery, Florence, Italy.

Sonnabend Gallery, Paris, France.

1977 Bernier Gallery, Athens, Greece.

1976 Sonnabend Gallery, New York, NY.

Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD.

1975 Sonnabend Gallery, New York, NY.

Ricke Gallery, Cologne, Germany.

1974 Sonnabend Gallery, Paris, France.

Schema Gallery, Florence, Italy.

- University Art Museum, Berkeley, CA.
- 1973 Sonnabend Gallery, New York, NY.
- Sonnabend Gallery, Paris, France.
- Sonnabend Gallery, New York, NY.
- 1972 M T L Gallery, Brussels, Belgium.
- Sonnabend Gallery, New York, NY.
- Lisson Gallery, London, England.
- Bonomo Gallery, Bari, Italy.
- Sonnabend Gallery, Paris, France.
- Toselli Gallery, Milan, Italy.
- 1971 The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY. Projects – Mel Bochner. (October – November)
- 112 Greene Street, New York, NY.
- 1970 Sperone Gallery, Turin, Italy.
- Toselli Gallery, Milan, Italy.
- Art and Project Gallery, Amsterdam, Netherlands.
- 1969 Heiner Friedrich Gallery, Munich, Germany.
- Konrad Fischer Gallery, Düsseldorf, Germany.
- Ace Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.
- 1966 School of Visual Arts Gallery, New York, NY.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2019 Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh. Carnegie Int'l, 57th ed., 2018.
Curated by Ingrid Schaffner (14 October – 24 March 2019)
- 2018 Lyndsey Ingram Gallery, London. My Favorite Color Is Rainbow.
(21 February – 23 March)
- Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio. A Measure of Humanity.
(22 June – 16 September)

- Tate Modern. Shape of Light: 100 Years of Photography and Abstract Art
(2 May – 14 October)
- National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea.
E.A.T. (Experiments in Art and Technology) (16 May – 16 September)
- 2017 MET Breuer, New York. Delirious: Art at the Limits of Reason, 1950-1980.
(13 September 2017 – 14 January 2018)
- Kentucky Museum of Arts and Crafts, Louisville, KY. Victory Over the Sun:
The Poetics and Politics of Eclipse. (19 August – 3 December)
- Castello di Rivoli and GAM Torino, Turin, Italy. Colori. (14 March – 23 July)
- MAAT, Dimensions Variable. (7 February – 28 May)
- 2016 Baltimore Museum of Art, Maryland, United States. On Paper: Finding Form.
(30 October 2016 – 30 April 2017)
- National Gallery, Washington, D.C. Los Angeles to New York: Dwan Gallery,
1959–1971. (30 September 2016 – 29 January 2017)
- Manifesta 11, The European Biennial of Contemporary Art, Löwenbräukunst,
Zurich, Switzerland. Self-Portraits and Self-Promotion. (11 June – 18
September)
- The Drawing Center, New York, NY. Drawing Dialogues: The Sol Le Witt
Collection. (15 April – 12 June)
- Totah Gallery, New York, NY. Verba Volant Scripta Manent. (25 February –
15 May)
- 2015 Pavillon de L'Arsenal, Paris, France. Artists and Architecture. Variable
Dimensions. curated by Didier Gourvennec Ogor and Gregory Lang. (15
October 2015 – 16 January 2016)
- MoMA PS1, New York, NY. Greater New York. (11 October 2015- 7 March
2016)
- Noguchi Museum, New York, NY. Museum of Stones. (7 October 2015 – 10
January 2016)
- The Lewis Glucksman Gallery, Cork, Ireland. Boolean Expressions:
Contemporary Art and Mathematical Data. (25 July – 8 November)
- Mudam Luxembourg Museum, Luxembourg. Eppur Si Muove, Art and
Technology, a Shared Sphere. (9 July 2015 – 1 January 2016)

- Gladstone Gallery, New York, NY. Hello Walls. (25 June – 31 July)
- Galleria Enrico Astuni, Bologna, Italy. Raccontare un luogo (Tales of a Place). curated by Lorenzo Bruni (6 June - 7 November)
- National Academy, New York, NY. Self: Portraits of Artists in Their Absence. (29 January – 3 May)
- 2014 Centre Pompidou, Paris, France. Le Nouveau Festival. (20 February – 11 March)
- La Panacee, Montpellier, France. Art by Telephone... Recalled. (7 February – 22 June)
- 2013 Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY. Ileana Sonnabend: Ambassador for the New. (21 December 2013 – 21 April 2014)
- PI, New York, NY. The Ceiling Should Be Green (天花板應該是綠色的) (8 November – 22 December)
- Firstsite, Colchester, England. Xerography. (8 September – 10 November)
- 21er Haus, Vienna, Austria. The Collection #3: Sign, Image, Object. (21 June – 10 November)
- Fondazione Prada, Milan, Italy. Re-Making When Attitudes Become Form. (1 June – 3 November)
- Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, NY. The Temptations of the Diagram. (30 March – 27 April)
- Vladimir Restoin Roitfeld Gallery, New York, NY. Merci, Mercy. (24 January – 17 February)
- 2012 Museo d'Arte, Lugano, Switzerland. Una finestra sul mondo, Da Dürer a Mondrian e oltre. (16 September 2012 – 6 January 2013)
- Kemper Art, Museum, St. Louis, MO. Notations: Contemporary Drawing as Idea and Process. (14 September 2012 – 7 January 2013)
- Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Germany. Alice in the Wonderland of Art. (22 June – 30 September)
- Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, Netherlands. Minimal Myth. (2 June – 16 September)
- deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, Lincoln, MA. Second Nature: Abstract Photography Then and Now. (26 May 2012 – 3 March 2013)

- On Stellar Rays, New York, NY. Toward A Warm Math. (22 April – 3 June)
- 2011 The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL. Light Years: Conceptual Art and the Photograph, 1965-1977. (11 December 2011 - 11 March 2012)
- Tate Liverpool, Liverpool, England. Alice in Wonderland. (4 November 2011 – 29 January 2012)
- The Tampa Museum of Art, Tampa, FL. Syntax: Text and Symbols for a New Generation. (9 July - 25 September)
- Janet Kurnatowski Gallery, New York, NY. Notable Henchman. (8 July – 31 July)
- Gagosian Gallery, New York, NY. Malevich and the American Legacy. (3 March – 30 April)
- 2010 CCA Andratx, Mallorca, Spain. Third Thoughts. (24 July- 24 October)
- Quint Contemporary Art, La Jolla, CA. Double Up. (11 June - 3 July)
- Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany. Weniger ist mehr. Bilder, Objekte, Konzepte aus Sammlung und Archiv von Herman und Nicole Daled. 1966–1978. (30 April – 25 July)
- Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA. Forms of Contingency: New York and Turin, 1960s-1970s. (24 April - 26 September)
- Villa Arson, Nice, France. Double Bind/ Stop Trying To Understand Me. (5 February - 30 May)
- Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC. Graphic Masters III. (15 January - 8 August)
- 2009 Galleria il Ponte Firenze, Florence, Italy. I arte e una parola. (12 December 2009 - 26 March 2010)
- MoMA PS1, New York, NY. 1969. (25 October 2009 - 5 April 2010)
- Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA. Target Practice: Painting Under Attack 1949-78. (25 June - 7 September)
- Eastside Projects, Birmingham, England. Sculpture Show. (2 May- 13 June)
- National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC. Inventing Marcel Duchamp: The Dynamics of Portraiture. (27 March - 2 August)
- Glenstone Foundation, Potomac, MD. If We Could Imagine. (March 2009 – October 2010)

- 2008 The Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, Scotland. Close-up. (24 October 2008 – 11 January 2009)
- Akademie der Künste, Berlin, Germany. Notation. (20 September – 16 November 2008). Exhibition travelled: Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, Karlsruhe, Germany (1 March – 26 July 2009)
- Mumok, Vienna, Austria. Genau und anders: Mathematik in der Kunst von Dürer bis Sol LeWitt. (28 February – 18 May)
- College Jacques Cartier, Chauny, France. Mel Bochner, Alighiero Boetti, Hanne Darboven.
- 2007 The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY. Lines, Grids, Stains, and Words. (13 June – 22 October)
- Tate St. Ives, Cornwall, England. If Everybody Had an Ocean: Brian Wilson, an Art Exhibition. (26 May – 23 September)
- Zwirner & Wirth, New York, NY. Conceptual Photography, 1964 – 1989. (9 May – 23 June)
- The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY. Live/Work: Performance into Drawing. (31 January – 31 May)
- 2006 Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA. Magritte and Contemporary Art: The Treachery of Images. (19 November 2006 – 4 March 2007)
- Solo Projects Studio B, Los Angeles, CA. Nineteen Sixty-Eight (17 June - 29 July)
- 2005 Dumbo Arts Center, Brooklyn, New York, NY. Rub Out The Word. (14 October – 13 November)
- The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY. Drawing From the Modern, 1945 – 1975. (14 September 2005 - 9 January 2006)
- Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY. Building and Breaking the Grid. (1 September 2005 - 8 January 2006)
- Max Wigram Gallery, London, England. Threshold. (8 July - 3 September)
- Queens Museum, New York, NY. Down The Garden Path: The Artist's Garden After Modernism. (26 June - 6 November)
- Julie Saul Gallery, New York, NY. Wordplay. (17 June - 19 August)
- Von Lintel Gallery, New York, NY. The Photograph In Question. (9 June - 29 July)

- Tate Modern, London, England. Open Systems: Rethinking Art c.1970. (1 June - 18 September)
- Pace Wildenstein Gallery, New York, NY. Logical Conclusions: 40 Years of Rule-Based Art. (18 February - 26 March)
- 2004 National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto, Japan. Traces. (9 November - 19 December)
- Davis Museum and Cultural Center, Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA. Infinite Possibilities. (9 September - 12 December)
- Musee d'Art Moderne et d'Art Contemporain, Nice, France. Intra-Muros. (26 June 2004 - 2 January 2005)
- Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA. Beyond Geometry. (13 June - 3 October)
- Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA. A Minimal Future? (14 March - 2 August)
- Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY. Whitney Biennial (11 March – 30 May)
- Museum of Modern Art, Shiga, Japan. The Copy Age – From Duchamp Through Warhol to Morimura.
- 2003 Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD. Work Ethic. (12 October 2003 - 11 January 2004)
- Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN. The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography 1960-1982. (11 October 2003 - 11 January 2004)
- Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA. Pittsburgh Platforms. (28 June – 5 October)
- Swiss Institute, New York, NY. Dust Memories. (3 June - 2 August)
- Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. eXhibition³. (2 February - 23 February)
- The Cooper Union, New York, NY. Under Pressure: Prints from Two Palms Press.
- 2002 Tate Modern, London, England. Flashing Into the Shadows: The Artists Film 1966-1976. (16 - 30 November)
- Bergen Kunstmuseum, Bergen, Norway. After the Beginning and Before the End. From the Drawings of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection.

- Detroit. (17 October 2002 – 5 January 2003)
- Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY. Visions from America. (27 June - 22 August)
- Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol, England. Shimmering Substance. (27 April – 23 June)
- Roth Horowitz Gallery, New York, NY. Copy. (2 May - 22 June)
- Akira Ikeda Gallery, New York, NY. An Empty Space. (1 January - 30 June)
- Wynn Kramarsky, New York, NY. Ad Infinitum.
- 2001 Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH. Division and Displacement As Painting. (12 May - 12 August)
- Leo Castelli Gallery, New York, NY. Saving Seeing. (12 January - 24 February)
- Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY. Flashing Into the Shadows: The Artist's Film After Pop and Minimal, 1966-1976. (7 January - 1 April)
- Musee d'Art et d'Histoire, Geneva, Switzerland. Art Express- Art Minimal et Conceptual Americain.
- 2000 Curt Marcus Gallery, New York, NY. In Process. (20 October - 25 November)
- The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY. Open Ends. (28 September 2000 - 4 March 2001)
- CAPC, Bordeaux, France. Presumés Innocents - L' Art Contemporain et l' Enfance. (7 June - 1 October)
- The Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, England. The Object Sculpture. (1 June - 1 August)
- Frac Picardie, Amiens, France. Zig – Zag. (1 April - 19 June)
- Spaces, Cleveland, OH. Painting Function: Making It Real.
- Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX. Contemporary Drawings from the Sarah - Ann and Werner Kramarsky Collection.
- Galleria Milano, Milan, Italy. L'elemento Verbale Nell' Arte Contemporanea.
- Sonnabend Gallery, New York, NY. Retrospective.
- 1999 Lawrence Markey Gallery, New York, NY. Drawings from the 1970's. (November – December)

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY. The American Century: Art and Culture 1900-2000 (Part II, 1950 - 2000). (26 September 1999 – 13 February 2000)

Dieu Donne Gallery, New York, NY. Drawn to Scale. (August –September)

Museu Serralves, Porto, Portugal. Circa 1968. (8 June – 29 August)

Curt Marcus Gallery, New York, NY. Drawings from the 1960's. (30 April - 29 May)

Esso Gallery, New York, NY. Scripta Manent. (24 April - 19 June)

The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA. After Image: Drawing Through Process. (11 April - 22 August)

American Academy Invitational Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture, The American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York, NY.

Tatunz Gallery, New York, NY. LeWitt, Bochner, Tschubarov.

1998 DeChiara/Stewart Gallery, New York, NY. Back to Back. (November – December)

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY. More Pieces for the Puzzle: Recent Additions to the Collection. (21 July - 8 September)

Dieu Donne Gallery, New York, NY. Paper Plus.

Basilico Fine Arts, New York, NY. Deep Thought.

Queensland Art Gallery, Queensland, Australia. Art Pared Down: Exploring Minimalism Across Media.

1997 Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, MA. Drawing is Another Kind of Language. (12 December 1997 - 22 February 1998)

Thread Waxing Space, New York, NY. Collection in Context; Selected from the contemporary photographs of hands from the collection of Henry Mendelssohn Buhl. (22 November 1997 – 4 January 1998)

Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, MA. The Serial Attitude. (20 September 1997 – 4 January 1998). Exhibition travelled: Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH (9 May – 8 August 1998)

Ubu Gallery, New York, NY. One-Line Drawing. (8 July - 31 July)

Numark Gallery, Washington, D.C. Geometric Abstraction: Mel Bochner, Imi Knoebel, Sol LeWitt, Andrew Spence. (January)

- National Museum of Art, Osaka, Japan. Gravity-Axis of Contemporary Art.
- Sonnabend Gallery, New York, NY. Group Exhibition.
- Kunsternes Hus, Oslo, Norway. Laying Low: Post Minimalism / Scatter Art.
Frac Picardie, Amiens, France. Au pied du mur.
- Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Stuttgart, Germany. Magie der Zahl.
- 1996 Frith Street Gallery/Karsten Schubert Gallery, London, England. From Figure to Object: A Century of Sculptor's Drawings. (11 September – 2 November)
- The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY. Thinking Print: Books to Billboards, 1980-95. (20 June – 10 September)
- Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France. L'Informe: Mode d'Emploi. (22 May – 26 August)
- National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. The Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Collection: 1945-1995. (31 March – 21 July)
- Deichtorhallen Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany. Sammlung Sonnabend – Von Der Pop Art Bis Heute. Amerikanische und Europäische Kunst Seit 1954. (23 February – 5 May)
- Brooke Alexander Gallery, New York, NY. Limited Edition Artists Books Since 1990.
- Galerie Arnaud Lefevre, Paris, France. Mel Bochner, Erik Satie, Philippe Seux.
- Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA. New Art on Paper.
- 1995 The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA. 1965-1995: Reconsidering the Object of Art. (15 October 1995 – 4 February 1996)
- The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY. Drawing on Chance: Selections from the Collection. (12 October 1995 – 23 January 1996)
- American Fine Arts, New York, NY. Mapping: A Response to MOMA. (21 January – 18 February)
- Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA. Repicturing Abstraction: The Politics of Space. (20 January – 19 March)
- Block Gallery, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL. Printmaking in America: Collaborative Prints and Presses, 1960-1990.
- 1994 The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY. A Century of Artists Books. (23 October 1994 – 24 January 1995)

- The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY. Painting and Sculpture: Recent Acquisitions. (16 June – 11 September)
- National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. From Minimal to Conceptual Art: Works from the Dorothy and Herbert Vogel Collection. (29 May – 27 November)
- Basilico Fine Arts, New York, NY. Location I: Bickerton, Bochner, Morris.
- Sonnabend Gallery, New York, NY. Group Exhibition.
- 1993 Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, NY. Extended Relations. (23 December 1993 – 15 January 1994)
- Grolier Club, New York, NY. The American Livre de Peintre. (16 March – 15 May)
- Yavne Art Workshop, Yavne, Israel. A Matchbox Enclosed.
- Nolan/Eckman Gallery, New York, NY. European & American Drawings 1961-1969.
- Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome, Italy. Do All Roads Lead to Rome?
- 1992 MoMA PS1, New York, NY. Postcards from Alphaville: Jean-Luc Godard in Contemporary Art 1963-1992. (8 November 1992 – 10 January 1993)
- Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD. Marking The Decades: Prints 1960-1990. (23 February – 26 April)
- Lingotto, Turin, Italy. Arte Americana 1930-1970.
- Galleria Primo Piano, Rome, Italy. Bochner, Chung, LeWitt.
- 1991 Guild Hall Museum, East Hampton, NY. A view from the 60's: Selections from the Leo Castelli Collection and the Michael and Ileana Sonnabend Collection.
- Lorence Monk Gallery, New York, NY. Drawings.
- Angles Gallery, Santa Monica, CA. Dots.
- Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, MA. American Abstraction.
- Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, MA. Motion and Document Sequence and Time: Eadweard Muybridge and Contemporary American Photography.
- 1990 David Nolan Gallery, New York, NY. An Overview of Drawings. (15 December 1990 – 26 January 1991)

Hood Museum, Dartmouth, Hanover, NH. Minimalism and Post-Minimalism: Drawing Distinctions. (27 October – 16 December)

Galerie 1900-2000, Paris, France. Art Conceptuel Formes Conceptuelles. (8 October – 3 November)

Albertina, Vienna, Austria. Amerikanische Zeichnungen in den achtziger Jahren. (16 May – 1 July). Exhibition travelled: Morsbroich Museum, Leverkusen, Germany (12 September – 4 November)

Kunsthalle Bielefeld, Bielefeld, Germany. Concept Art, Minimal Art, Arte Povera, Land Art: Sammlung Marzona. (18 February – 8 April)

University Gallery, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL. Divergent Styles: Contemporary American Drawing. (18 February – 18 March)

Nahan Contemporary, New York, NY. Concept-Decoratif: Anti-Formalist Art of the 70's. (5 – 27 January)

American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, New York, NY. Invitational Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA. The Unique Print.

Susan Sheehan Gallery, New York, NY. Minimalist Prints.

Sonnabend Gallery, New York, NY. Mel Bochner, Peter Halley, Robert Rauschenberg.

1989 Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris, France. L'art conceptuel, une perspective. (22 November 1989 – 18 February 1990). Exhibition travelled: Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, Montréal, Canada (5 August – 21 October 1990)

North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, NC. Immaterial objects: works from the permanent collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. (14 October – 31 December). Exhibition travelled: Albany Museum of Art, Albany, GA (12 January – 25 February 1990); San Jose Museum of Art, San Jose, CA (21 July – 23 September 1990)

Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York, NY. National Print Exhibition, 25th Biennial: Projects & Portfolios. (6 October – 31 December)

Hirschl & Adler Modern, New York, NY. Repetition.

Stedman Art Gallery, Rutgers University, Camden, NJ. Conspicuous Display.

Rickey Renier Gallery, Chicago, IL. Lines & Geometry.

Sonnabend Gallery, New York, NY. New Works by Gallery Artists.

- 1988 Elizabeth McDonald Gallery, New York, NY. Abstracted Image.
- Althea Viafora Gallery, New York, NY. Raw Materials.
- Galerie Fred Jahn, Munich, Germany. Amerikanische Druckgraphik: Recent American Prints.
- Leubsdorf Gallery, Hunter College, New York, NY. Systems and Abstraction.
- Lehman College Gallery, Bronx, New York, NY. Turning Point: Art and Politics in 1968.
- 1987 Museo Nacional Centro De Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain. Sonnabend Collection. 25 Years of Selection and Activity. (30 October 1987 – 15 February 1988). Exhibition travelled: CAPC Musee D'Art Contemporain, Bordeaux, France; Art Cologne, Cologne, Germany; Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, Germany; Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome, Italy; Museo d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto, Trento, Italy; Musee Rath, Geneva, Switzerland; Sezon Museum of Art, Tokyo, Japan; Miyagi Museum of Art, Sendai, Japan; The Fukuyama Museum of Art, Hiroshima, Japan.
- Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, MI. Reconnecting. (12 June – 27 September)
- Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA. 1967: At the Crossroads. (12 March – 26 April)
- Russell Sage College, Albany, New York, NY. The Shape of Abstraction.
- The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, FL. This is not a Photograph; 20 Years of Large-Scale Photography, 1966-1986. Exhibition travelled: Akron Art Museum, Akron, OH.
- Laurie Rubin Gallery, New York, NY. Points of Contact.
- Carnegie Mellon University Art Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA. Drawings from the Eighties.
- Holly Solomon Gallery, New York, NY. Early Concepts of the Last Decade.
- 1986 Pratt Institute Gallery, Brooklyn, New York, NY. Spirit Tracks: Big Abstract Drawing.
- Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale, FL. An American Renaissance: Painting & Sculpture since 1940.
- Holman Hall Art Gallery, Trenton State College, Trenton, NJ. Contemporary Issues III: Robert and Nancy Kaye Collection.

- Stux Gallery, New York, NY. The Shape of Abstraction.
- 1985 Bard College Center, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY. The Maximal Implications of the Minimal Line.
- Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, WI. New Abstraction.
- Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles, CA. Drawings.
- 1984 Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden. Vanishing Points. (April – May)
- Cranbrook Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills, MI. Viewpoint, '84.
- Islip Art Museum, East Islip, New York, NY. Minding Measure: Measuring Mind.
- 1983 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY. Minimalism to Expressionism: Painting and Sculpture since 1965. (2 June – 4 December)
- 1982 Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL. 74th American Exhibition. (12 June – 1 August)
- Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT. Prints by Contemporary Sculptors.
- Musée des Beaux-Arts et d'archéologie de Besançon, Besancon, France. One, Two, Three.
- 1981 Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France. Murs. (17 December 1981 – 8 February 1982)
- Sonnabend Gallery, New York, NY. Summer Group Show.
- 1980 Pittsburgh Plan for Art, Pittsburgh, PA. Explorations in the 70's. (12 April – 4 May)
- Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA. Mel Bochner/Richard Serra. (5 April – 11 May)
- 1979 Palazzo Reale, Milan, Italy. Pittura Ambiente. (9 July – 16 September)
- Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY. The Decade in Review: Selections from the 1970s. (19 June – 2 September)
- Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France. Oeuvres Contemporaines des Collections Nationales. (7 February – 2 April)
- Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY. Whitney Biennial. (6 February – 1 April)

- Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, CT. The Minimal Tradition.
- 1978 Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA. Eight Artists. (29 April – 25 June)
- Leo Castelli Gallery, New York, NY. Numerals 1924-1977. (7 – 28 January)
- University of California Museum, Santa Barbara, CA. Contemporary Drawing/New York.
- Tampa Bay Art Center, Tampa, FL. Three Installations: Acconci, Bochner, Le Va.
- 1977 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY. Whitney Biennial. (19 February – 3 April)
- Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL. 10th Anniversary.
- Rosa Esman Gallery, New York, NY. Photo Notations II.
- Sonnabend Gallery, New York, NY. Acconci/Bochner/Le Va.
- 1976 Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, MI. American Artists: A New Decade. (31 July – 19 September). Exhibition travelled: Fort Worth Art Museum, Fort Worth, TX (14 November 1976 – 2 January 1977)
- Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL. Seventy-second American Exhibition. (13 March – 9 May)
- The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY. Drawing Now. (23 January – 9 March)
- Rosa Esman Gallery, New York, NY. Photo Notation.
- 1975 Art Gallery of Ontario, Ontario, Canada. Prints. (18 December 1975 – 18 January 1976)
- The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY. PRINTSEQUENCE. (10 October 1975 – 18 January 1976)
- Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD. Fourteen Artists. (15 April – 1 June)
- The Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, OH. Bochner, Le Va, Rockburne, Tuttle.
- Museum Morsbroich, Leverkusen, Germany. Drawings 3, American

Drawings.

High Museum, Atlanta, GA. The New Image.

- 1974 Kunsthalle and Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne, Germany. Projekt '74 – Aspects of International Art in the Early 1970s. (July – August)
- Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL. Idea & Image in Art. (23 March – 5 May)
- Princeton Art Museum, Princeton, New JJ. Line as Language: six artists draw. (23 February – 31 March)
- The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY. Some Recent American Art.
Exhibition travelled: Australia; New Zealand.
- 1973 Parcheggio di Villa Borghese, Rome, Italy. Contemporanea. (November 1973 -- February 1974)
- Fogg Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. New American Graphic Art. (12 September – 28 October)
- Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA. American Art, Third Quarter Century. (22 August – 14 October)
- Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY. American Drawings 1963-1973. 25 May – 22 July)
- New York Cultural Center, New York, NY. 3d into 2d. (19 January – 11 March)
- Paris, France. Festival d'Autome a Paris.
- 1972 Museum Fridericianum, Friedrichsplatz, and Neue Galerie, Kassel, Germany. Documenta 5. (30 June – 8 October)
- Spoletto Festival, Spoleto, Italy. 420 West Broadway. (23 June – 9 July)
- Kunstmuseum, Basel, Switzerland. Konzept-Kunst. (18 March – 23 April)
- Sonnabend Gallery, New York, NY. 13 Artists Chosen for Documenta.
- 1971 Galerie Nächst St. Stephan Rosemarie Schwarzwaldler, Innsbruck, Austria. Situation Concepts.
- 1970 The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY. Information. (2 July – 20 September)
- Dwan Gallery, New York, NY. Language IV. (June)

- The Jewish Museum, New York, NY. Using Walls. (13 May – 4 August)
- Museo Civico d'Arte Moderna, Turin, Italy. Conceptual Art/Arte/Povera/Land Art.
- New York Cultural Center, New York, NY. Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects.
- Allen Memorial Museum, Oberlin, OH. Art in the Mind.
- Multiples Gallery, New York, NY. Artists and Photographs.
- 1969 School of Visual Arts (SVA), New York, NY. Groups (3 – 20 November)
- Kunsthalle Bern, Bern, Switzerland. When Attitudes Become Form. (22 March – 27 April)
- Finch College Museum of Art, New York, NY. Art in Progress IV.
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- 1968 Dwan Gallery, New York, NY. Language II. (May)
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- Bykert Gallery, New York, NY. Group Exhibition.
- Rejective Art. Organized by American Federation of Arts for travel in the United States.
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- Finch College Museum of Art, New York, NY. Art in Series.
- Museum of Contemporary Crafts, New York, NY. Monuments.

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Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY
 The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago
 The Art Museum of South Texas, Corpus Christi, TX
 Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn
 Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA
 Centre Pompidou, Paris
 David Owsley Museum of Art, Ball State University, Muncie, IN
 Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, MA

Fonds National d'Art Contemporain, France
 Fotomuseum Winterthur, Winterthur, Switzerland
 FRAC Bourgogne, Dijon, France
 FRAC Bretagne, Châteaugiron, France
 FRAC Picardie, Amiens, France
 Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, IN
 The Jewish Museum, New York
 Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles
 Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
 Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University, Atlanta
 MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, MA
 Moderna Museet, Stockholm
 The Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal
 Museet for Samtidskunst, Roskilde, DK
 The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles
 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA
 The Museum of Modern Art, New York
 Museu Serralves, Porto, Portugal
 National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
 The Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, AU
 Reina Sofia, Madrid
 San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA
 The Städel Museum, Frankfurt
 Tate, London
 University Art Museum, University at Albany, SUNY, Albany, NY
 The Wexner Center of the Arts, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH
 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

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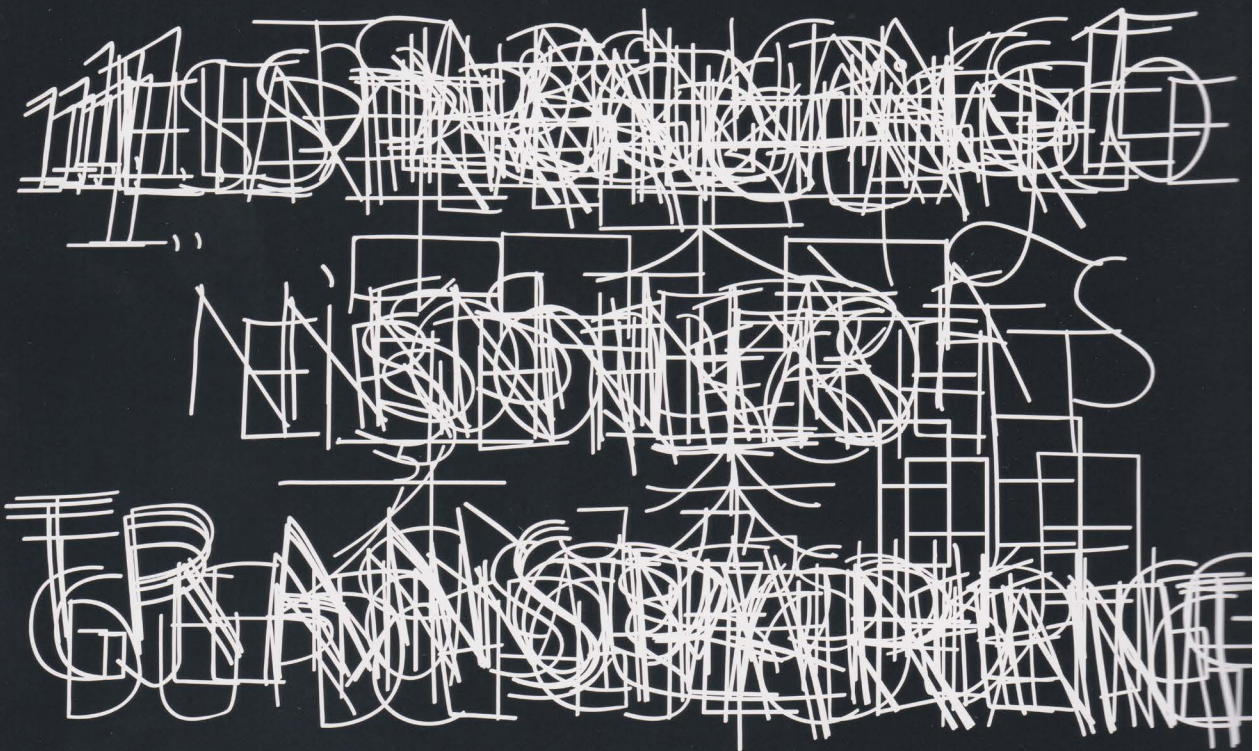
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BORDERCROSSINGS



LANGUAGE + ART

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The Bochnerian Not

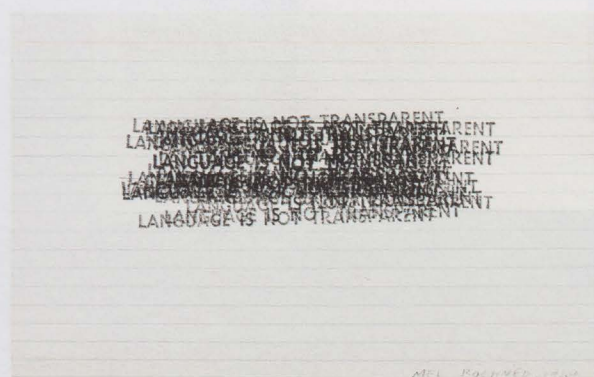


Left to right: Mel Bochner, *Cezanne Said*, 2015, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches; *Drool*, 2015, oil and acrylic on canvas, 91 x 60 inches; *\$#!+ \$#!+ \$#!+*, 2016, oil on canvas, 60 x 45 inches. Installation Peter Freeman Gallery, NY. Images courtesy the artist.

An Interview with Mel Bochner

Interview by Robert Enright
Introduction by Meeka Walsh





I can't begin this introduction to our interview with Mel Bochner by saying, "What interests me about his work is ..." because everything about his work interests me. What I'll address in particular, however, is, for me, the Gordian knot, the conundrum of his repeated assertion that "Language is not transparent." The statement appeared first as a four-part work in 1969, bearing that phrase as its title. A rubber stamp on four notecards, saying once, "Language Is Not Transparent," twice, overlapping on the second card, then three times, I think, the phrase laid down over itself; and then on the fourth card, a multiple stamping, an obliteration of the phrase, not cancelling out but making manifest by way of demonstration, stamped into illegibility on itself. The next iteration of the phrase, in 1970, as though white chalk on a black board, was a wall painting, a statement of a certain kind of independence in its apparently unruly drips running to the floor—a painting but not a commodifiable object—a work that Mel Bochner has done in numerous locations, each one unlike the one before.

Language is not transparent; that much is clear. We know about its ambiguities, the freight of culture, its failure to be the full parallel or replica or equivalent of the thing it addresses. After he had completed art school, Mel Bochner went back to university to read philosophy. In the thorough catalogue essay for the exhibition "Mel Bochner: Strong Language," mounted at the Jewish Museum in New York in 2014, Norman L Kleeblatt noted that Wittgenstein's writings were influential for many artists in the '60s and '70s, Bochner among them. In particular, Kleeblatt said, it was because of Wittgenstein's reluctance to close off on anything and, he wrote, that the philosopher "urged an incessant questioning of ideas and assumptions," ideas well-evidenced in Bochner's work.

So the conundrum: If language isn't transparent, how do we see through to meaning? Well, we can't—it's not possible to read with any certainty. In his interview with John Coplans published in *Art Forum* in June 1974, Bochner said he felt drawn to Wittgenstein's beautifully concise summation: "What can't be said must be passed over in silence." Speaking with Coplans about looking closely at the work of Kasimir Malevich, Bochner continues, "If you have had any deep experience through your own eyes it gives you a type of knowledge that's not transposable to any other knowledge. There is an order of thought which is only visible." And further, on standing in front of a work of art, in this case by Malevich, "Malevich brings us to the edge of language" (*Solar Systems & Rest Rooms, Writings and Interviews, 1965–2007*, Mel Bochner, An OCTOBER Book, The MIT Press, 2008). More is said in this exchange; I've selected lines that seem to address my puzzling through the opacity that "not transparent" could mean. No one speaks better on Bochner than Bochner, and Malevich appears the perfect medium to carry the question of the mutable gap between language and paintings, or text and colour.

1. *Language Is Not Transparent*, 1969, rubber stamp on notecard, 5 x 8 inches each.

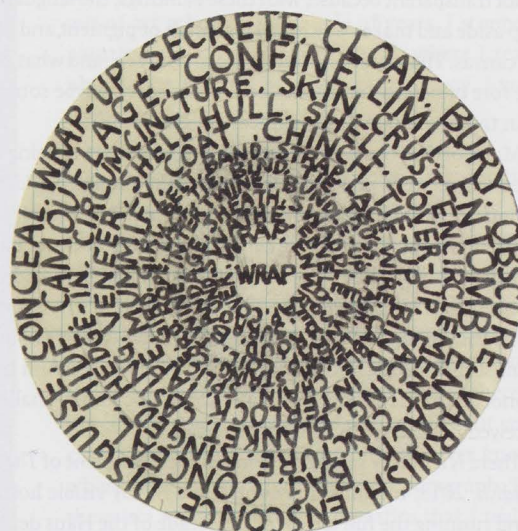
2. *Portrait of Eva Hesse*, 1966, pen and ink on graph paper, 4.375 inches diameter.

About painting, and leaving behind his engagement with Conceptual Art, of which he was named one of the primary instigators, Bochner explains why, in 1979, he began to make paintings. He tells us in the following interview that this wasn't the beginning, that he'd always been a painter, just one who didn't paint. What he introduces is the satisfying idea of "surplus" to explain the difference between Conceptual Art and painting on canvas. It's a nice word of plenitude, a round word of abundance—enough and then some more—for later. And later is the issue. It's what remains in the eye, in the being, after the idea has been seen and understood. It's what he identified in his conversation with curator Johanna Burton in the catalogue *Mel Bochner: Language 1966–2006*, published by the Art Institute of Chicago, 2007, as "a surplus meaning, a visual meaning ... that survives the consumption of the narrative."

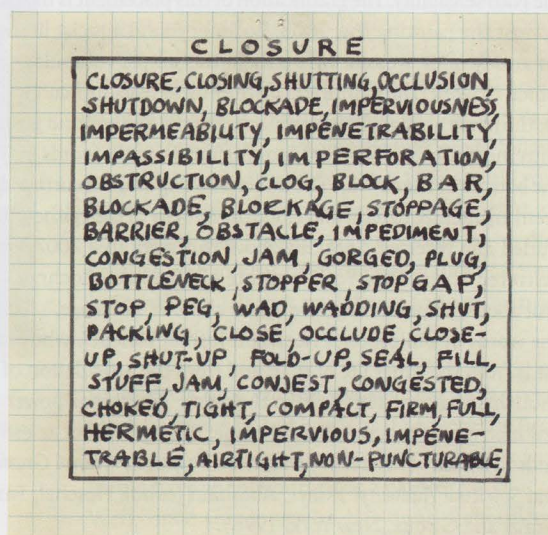
If language is not transparent, what happens when colour is added to it? Is the eye confounded in the oscillating flicker between colour and text, and is colour really more legible than language? Bochner's series "If the Color Changes," which he began in 1997, challenges the viewer to settle the eye and see. With work, it can be done but only when you peel the layer of one element from the other; it's either colour or it's text but it can't be both together. But it is a painting, right? So, what's it about? What's its subject, the increasingly agitated viewer asks. That's the subject. The question is its own answer. All the issues/ideas/queries the artist raises in the series "If the Color Changes" and with the "Thesaurus Paintings" that follow are here. His dichotomies, prevarications, ambiguities, screens and covers, assaults and cajoling, the chromatic treats and rewards, the shocks and surprises, the anomalies. Certainty slips away, and the apprehension that can't be articulated is in the gap between language and colour, between meaning and sensing or feeling. That's the place art exists, the artist tells us, "in the space where the mental and the physical overlap."

As for anomalies, I nominate Mel Bochner's painting *Zilch*, 2016. Clearly readable, it's a metonymy, standing in for itself, and, contrarian that the artist is, *Zilch* is really something! The green painted word sits on its canvas ground proud as a fluffed winter chickadee. There it is, everything and nothing, at once. Really, the last word on nothing, with its unlikeable palette. And perfect, the word's meaning undercutting its presence, and language still is not transparent.

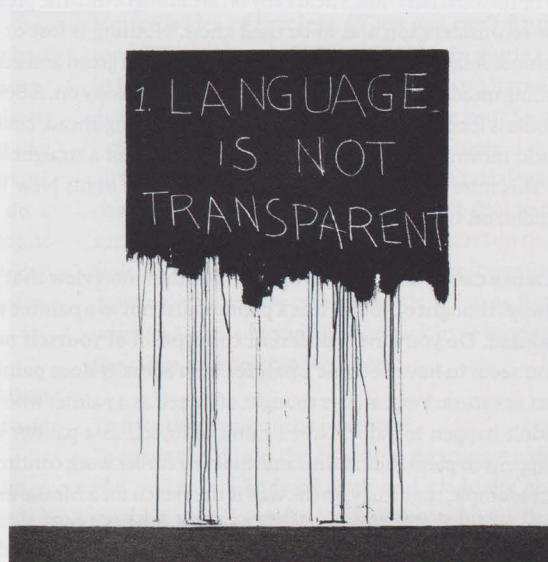
I want to talk about beauty, a word I don't think I've seen associated with Bochner's work. It's my word, not his, but intentionality is his and it is certainly evidenced in the work; the choice of words and colour is not happenstance. When palette undercuts image, an ellipsis presents itself to me in a painting like *Howl*, 2016, where the title alone conjures the poet Allen Ginsberg, but the language—Snort, Holler, Hiss, Bark, Snarl—has no direct connection to the long poem of the same name, or to the painting's minty, surfy, ocean-foamy shades of green. But it's beautiful. As are: *Obsolete*, *Block Head*, *Blah Blah Blah*, all from 2016. Here, it seems Bochner is testing his assertion that language



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3. *Portrait of Sol LeWitt*, 1966, pen and ink on graph paper, 5.25 x 5.5 inches.

4. *Language Is Not Transparent*, 1970, chalk on paint on wall, 72 x 48 inches. Collection of Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

is not transparent because, with these paintings, the language does step aside and makes way for a Hosannah of pigment and gesture on canvas. The words and letters are overridden, and what slips to the fore of perception is pure ocular pleasure, maybe something akin to James Elkins's alchemical delight.

Much of the vocabulary Bochner uses falls short of being words of endearment or praise or celebration, but *The Joys of Yiddish*, in various iterations, or *Jew* are a different order. Norman Kleeblatt noted in the catalogue *Strong Language* that Mel Bochner had told him his use of language was deeply rooted in Jewish thought, with its essential emphasis on reading and interpretation. The tradition of iconoclasm is also his with the Second Commandment's injunction against the making and displaying of graven images. And he is an iconoclast in the sense of the term's other meaning—challenging received notions, with some consistency.

There is a hugely satisfying irony in the placement of *The Joys of Yiddish*, 2013, mounted in Munich in a highly visible horizontal band running the full length of the facade of the Haus der Kunst, an edifice built by Hitler to house examples of art considered ideal to the Nazi sensibility. The gratification of this placement is measured against the painting *Jew*, 2008. Bochner found a racist litany on an anti-Semitic website where there was ample vocabulary with which to work. The painting is disturbing to read, difficult to look at; the harsh acidic yellow against a terminal grey ground presents with increasing urgency and more agitation as the words build to the bottom of the canvas. The underpainting and the surface drips seem an attempt to feint and elude the ferocity of the epithets being hurled and received. Speaking about this work in a 2007 lecture delivered at the New York Institute of Fine Arts, Bochner said, "All abuses of power begin with the abuse of language," echoing the words of philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel, who wrote, "It is from the inner life of man and from the articulation of evil thoughts that evil actions take their rise. Speech has power and few men realize that words do not fade. What starts out as a sound ends in a deed" ("What We Might Do Together," *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, Essays, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1996).

Mel Bochner told us he sets aside certain ideas, bracketing them to be revisited later. Ideas held early on are brought into the present for reconsideration and to be used anew. Nothing is lost or left behind. A satisfying word picture in my mind is a green and gently rolling meadow. A pacific cluster of sheep moves nicely on. A Border Collie is focused on the task: rounding up, trotting ahead, circling back, moving his charges inexorably forward. Not a straight line.

This interview was conducted with the artist in his New York studio, on November 7, 2018.

BORDER CROSSINGS: You have said in another interview that you always thought of yourself as a painter, just not as a painter who painted. Do you have a different conception of yourself now? You seem to have become a painter who actually does paint.

MEL BOCHNER: Yes, I always thought of myself as a painter who just didn't happen to paint. Now I think of myself as a painter who happens to paint. But at the same time my earlier work continues. For example, that study on the wall is the sketch for a *Measurement* installation at Dia Beacon, based on an idea from 1969.

Is it your sense that nothing ever gets lost; things are always reiterated or reclaimed?

I like the idea of reclaimed. I don't think ideas have a shelf life. My job is to continuously try to move forward and let things go where they're going to go. At certain points an idea feels like you've exhausted it, but at another point in your life you realize you didn't take it far enough. The word portraits of Eva Hesse and Sol LeWitt and Robert Smithson sat in the drawer for 30 years until Richard Field was organizing my show at Yale. He came across them and said, "We have to show these." When I looked at them again I had the feeling that there was still juice left in the lemon, that I hadn't squeezed it all out. But, at that point, I didn't know what to do with the idea. It couldn't be portraits again. I had done that. So a couple of years later I came across the new edition of the thesaurus, which was totally different from the one I'd had in college. It had obscenities in it, which struck me as being a dramatic change in the politics of ordinary language, because little kids use a thesaurus and now it says "Fuck you." So I started exploring what had happened to the boundaries of public discourse, fishing around in the thesaurus and seeing what I could catch, picking out words that interested me, or that led somewhere, or that I could arrange into a narrative. Going back to the thesaurus was not a return to something from 1966. Then I had chosen a word in advance for Eva; I had chosen one for Sol and one for Smithson. Now I was looking for ways in which the synonyms could create a narrative. It felt like the idea was fresh again.

There seems to be a progression in the "Thesaurus" paintings. They often start in a positive frame of mind and then the tone of the words begins to shift, so by the time you get to the end of the painting, they've become dark and scatological. Is that a personal inclination or simply a reflection of the way the words are listed in the thesaurus?

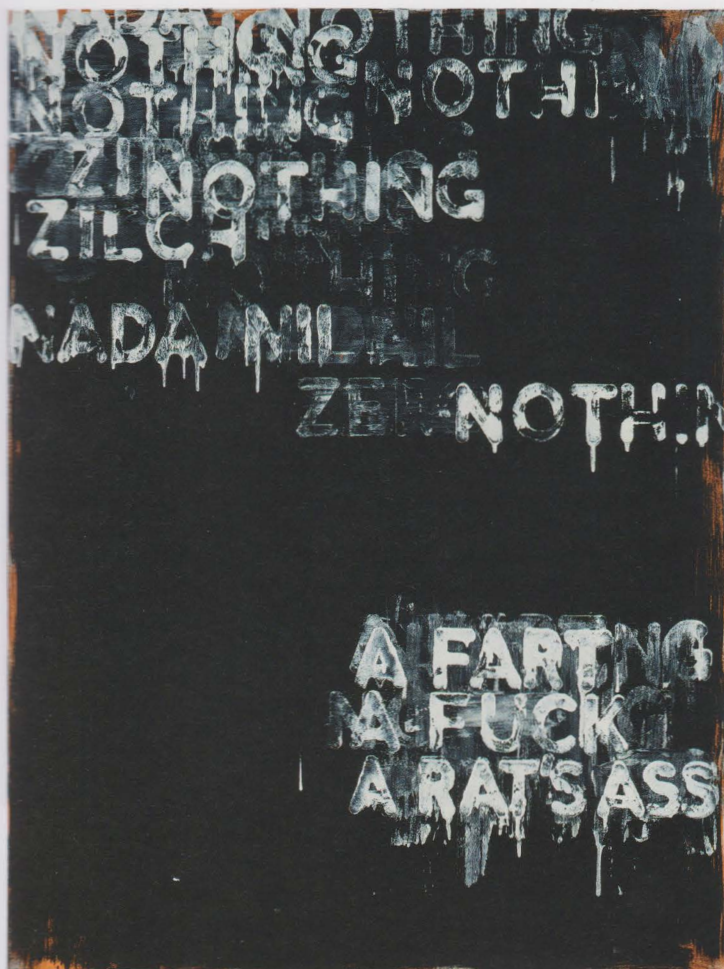
The thesaurus lists words objectively by parts of speech: nouns, verbs, adjectives. The "dark and scatological" is the intentionality of the paintings. The words are like a fund that I can do whatever I want with. In the earlier ones I would start with a more Latinate and formal language and then let it all collapse. That's my "personal inclination."

That it's entropic?

Basically you could call it entropic. It self-degrades.

So let's talk about your early interest in language. When you read Wittgenstein, does he touch something in your sensibility with which you could begin to work?

I don't think there is any direct causal relationship between Wittgenstein and my work, other than what you might call a certain affinity for a way of thinking. What I was looking for in my early work was something that didn't belong to anyone else. It occurred to me that two things didn't belong to anybody, because they belonged to everybody: numbers and language. Whatever you did with them, anyone else could have done. So they didn't have any direct art priority. I was very taken by the Jasper Johns show in 1964, the surprising and mysterious ways that he introduced language into the visual field. And, of course,



Nothing, 2015, oil and acrylic on canvas,
48 x 36 inches.

by his number paintings. But in a Bloomian sense, it seemed to me he hadn't taken it far enough.

So you had to carry the narrative further?

Well, when you're young you're looking for a spot where you can build your own sandcastle.

You've said that previously, as a student, you had been doing a mash-up of Gorky and de Kooning. There was a different way of becoming an artist in the 1950s. To study painting you tried to paint like everybody you liked. How do you do a Mondrian? How do you do a Dubuffet? How do you do a Gorky? It doesn't mean you want to be them; it just means you want to expand your vocabulary. But then you reach a point, and I reached that point, where I didn't know who I was.

You mean you were a chameleon who had taken on the colours of Clyfford Still and Dubuffet and had become them?

I never felt that I was them. I thought I could learn from them, that there was something I needed to know, something I could use. You're always

looking for something you can use. After being out of art school for a couple of years, I stopped painting and went back to school, where I read philosophy but not in any organized way. I was trying to clear my head.

You say your pursuit of ideas wasn't systematic, but it sounds like you were reading a lot of philosophy and that, for you, those ideas were circulating inside your imagination and were becoming generative.

You don't really get ideas out of Wittgenstein; you get a manner of being. You can begin to sum up Heidegger; you can sort of sum up Sartre—there's not all that much to sum up, I'm afraid—but you can't sum up Wittgenstein. You can never know where he's going to go in the next paragraph. So there is a kind of mental gymnastics that I really admire. He never stops. He goes over and over the same idea, looking at it from every perspective. Almost beating it to death. There is a relentlessness to what he does. I think that is the aspect of Wittgenstein that mattered the most to me. I never wanted to have a signature style, or material, or a manner of working. I wanted the freedom to follow my thinking wherever it took me. Why should you limit yourself? I guess the best model for that as an artist is still Picasso. He did whatever he did because he had kept open the possibility of doing it. So I always felt that my job was to keep open as many possibilities as I could.

In an essay on Cézanne you say that with every mark he made, he felt it was as if he were the first and only painter. I gather that is not a feeling you would have about yourself as a painter?

Well, once someone else has done something, you can only be second. One of the ideas that interested me a lot in the beginning was Edmund Husserl's idea of brackets. When you can't figure something out in math, you set it aside by putting it in brackets. You haven't eliminated it; you haven't discarded it; it's just there waiting for you. So as I started reducing my work more and more, I put all those things aside: "Right now I can't deal with colour; I can't deal with shape; I can't deal with surface. So what can I deal with; what can I do that feels authentic to me?" In the beginning it was just drawing numbers or writing words. Then as time went on I wanted to add things back in to increase the range and depth of the work.

To take them out of the brackets?

To move them into the equation. As you get older you build up a body of work and gradually give yourself more permission. I always thought that if Mondrian in his most classical year—1923 or



1



2



3

1. *Gobbledygook*, 2015, oil and acrylic on canvas, 72 x 48 inches.

2. *Block Head*, 2016, oil on canvas, 80 x 60 inches.

3. *Obsolete*, 2016, oil on canvas, 88 x 80 inches.

4. *Blah Blah Blah*, 2015, oil on canvas, 72 x 48 inches.



1924—if somebody had shown him *Victory Boogie Woogie* (1944), unfinished with all that masking tape, and said, “You’re going to paint this in 20 years,” he would have said, “You’re out of your mind, there’s no way I’m going to do that. It’ll never happen.” Or he would have had a heart attack and dropped dead on the spot. So if you’re fortunate to work for a certain length of time, there’s a trajectory but it’s not direct. If you want to continue making things that surprise you, you have to go against your own sensibility and see where the contradictions will take you.

The deferral that is contained within the brackets is a lovely notion. Does it mean that the act of being an artist is an engagement with contingency?

Yes, but there are always limits to contingency. Look, if you come into your studio, day after day, year after year, you want to have the feeling by the end of that day that you might have done something you’ve never seen before, something unexpected. If it’s the same old thing, then what are you doing? The place to be is where you don’t know where your work is going. If it doesn’t go anywhere today, that’s okay, too, because maybe it will tomorrow.

The philosophers you’re talking about, including Wittgenstein and going all the way back to Kant, are concerned with the ineffable. Your work and the way that you use language seem

to be about that kind of ineffability. No matter how much we declare, “There is always another space; there is always another reading; there is always another hearing.” That’s the sense of contingency I’m getting at.

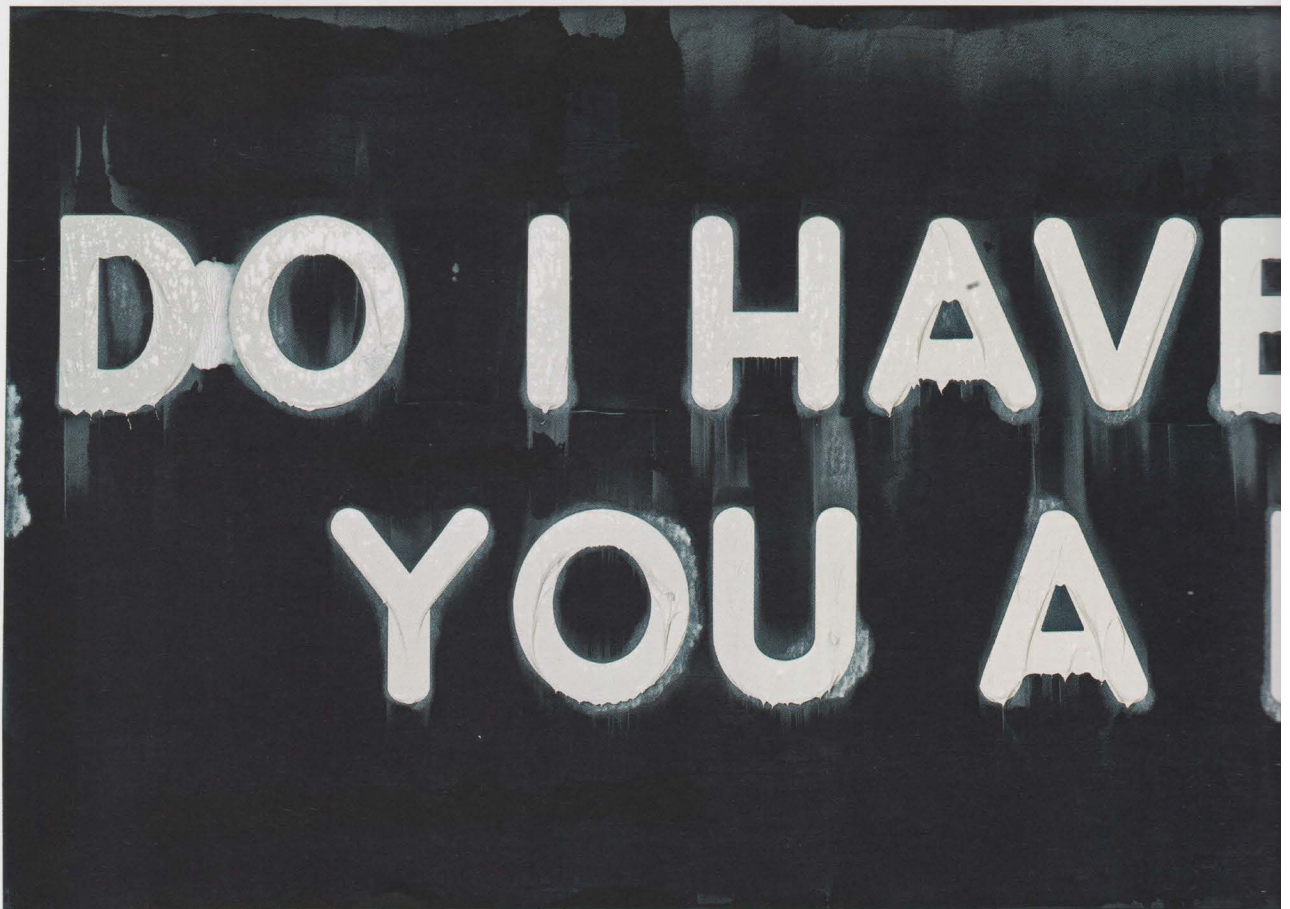
Yes, and then one day you die.

What about imminence, the about-to-happen?

We’re talking now about something that you’re not conscious of and you don’t really know how it happens. You start with whatever you’re working on and, if you’re lucky, it takes you somewhere. I know it’s hard for a lot of people to follow my work because the different ways I have made things and the different things I’ve thought about might not seem connected. But there is a thread running through it. The interest in my early work is altogether different from interest in my recent work, and that’s fine with me. There’s a limit to how much control you have over reception. Or want to have.

But you describe art as a form of thinking and that happens every time you come into your studio.

Most people consider thinking as a structured thing, but I think about it as a process. While you’re making something, anything, you’re simultaneously thinking about it visually, emotionally and intellectually. You can’t just think; you have to think about something.



When is the first language painting? Is it 1969?

I didn't start painting *qua* painting until later, but I guess you'd have to say that it's the acrylic and chalk piece I painted on the wall in 1970 called *Language Is Not Transparent*. In that piece I was trying to find a way to bring an aspect of what happens when you make a painting—the painting of it—into a thought. So the drips are not a function of sloppiness; they are a function of un-finishedness, that the work of language and painting can never end. It's always leaking; it's always dripping down. And then there are pieces like *Theory of Boundaries* (1969–70) with the red pigment rubbed into the wall. I didn't want to work on a stretched canvas because I didn't want predetermined boundaries to define anything. But as time went on I had no choice. After every exhibition the works I was painting on the wall would be painted out. I wasn't thinking of them as conceptual art; they weren't like a LeWitt with instructions that other people could do. Only I could paint them. So in order to preserve the ideas, I had to put it into some form that was not ephemeral.

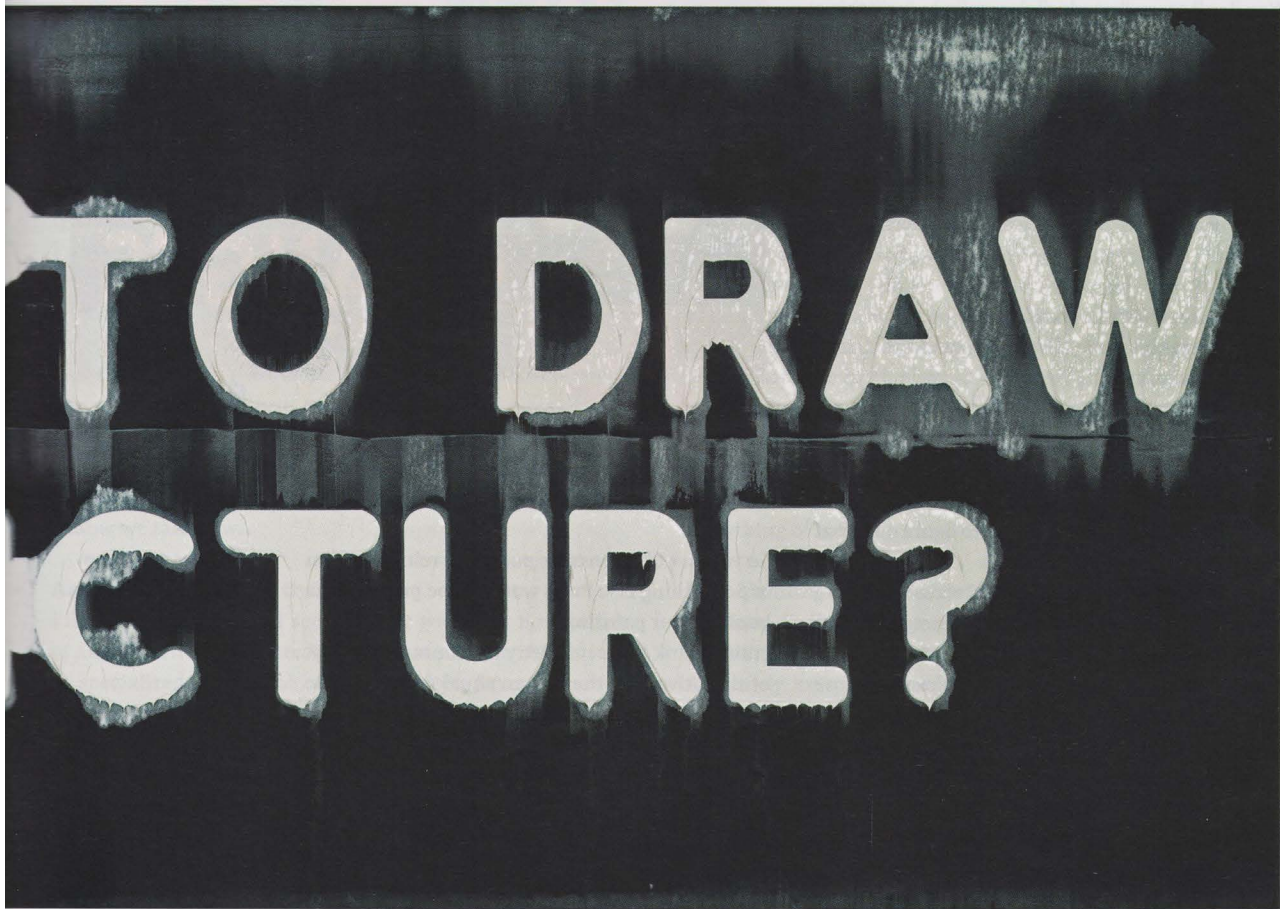
Do I Have to Draw You a Picture?, 2018,
oil on velvet, 90 x 30 inches.

Did you have a eureka moment in 1969 when you did the stamp piece? Did you know something was really going on there?

Yes, I thought there was something going on, but not where it might be going. It's like the early "Thesaurus" drawings; it was years later that I figured out I could use the stamps in another way, a painterly way, since painterliness was one of the first things that I'd bracketed out.

What is your understanding of how the "Thesaurus" paintings have changed over the years?

It's a pendulum. In the early ones, I painted each letter; each letter is a small painting inside a big painting. I painted them by hand, but so as not to look like they were made by hand. People ask why don't I use a stencil and avoid wasting all that time. First of all, they're fun to make, so I don't think of it as wasting time. Second, you can't make those paintings with a stencil. But more recently, I've been letting things go, letting the act and the tool itself define the image. The large-scale stamps have swung the pendulum to another place.



You'll use different ways of organizing and composing the letters, so they'll be in columns right to left, or you'll begin a series of words, the next line will be a contradiction, and then the following line will pick up the thread of the contradicted thought.

The "Thesaurus" paintings are a lot about voice, about who's speaking and the tone of one's voice. I don't think it is anything that painting has dealt with very well. It's one of the places where colour comes in because colour sets a tone, in an aural as well as visual sense. The viewer becomes a reader, a very different sense of involvement. The words grab the viewer. Once they see there is something to read, they're liable to stop and read it. They engage with the painting in a different way, because seeing and reading take place in separate parts of the brain.

Do you mean the reader is optically obliged?

Yes.

Even though an idea is an abstraction.

Exactly. What you hope is that the surplus—which is the painting itself—will outlast the idea. My critique of conceptualism was that the delivery system rarely outlived the idea.

You don't mean "surplus" as excess, as something left over, or something that is redundant?

Not redundant but something that survives the point when you think, okay, I get it. I want there to be something—the way it is made, the way it is painted, the colour, whatever—that has meaning and value in and of itself. To me, it is important that there continues to be something engaging to look at.

But you want to hold the viewer?

Yes, I want to sustain the engagement. It is not one-shot painting.

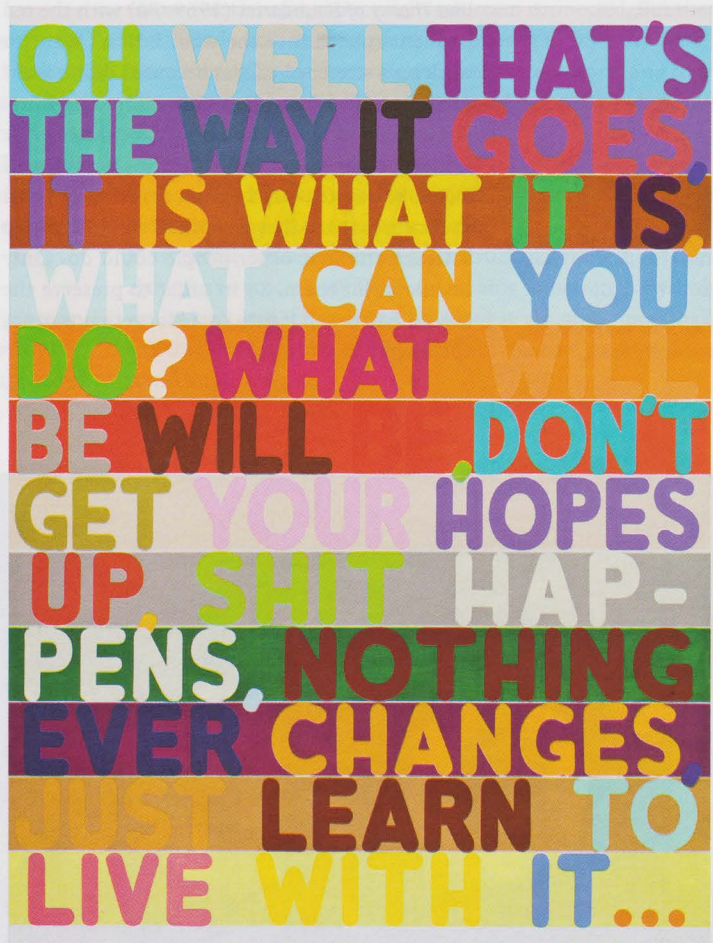
There are strategies for that through the relationship between figure and ground. Some of them get so subtle that the letters drop out, so to read the painting, viewers have to figure out what it is they are actually looking at.

And you have to work to see it. Because you have to focus and refocus your eyes to even see some of those letters that virtually disappear into the ground colour. So you have to get closer or move back, or put on your glasses. That's what I want to do: to engage the viewer and hold them there, hope they feel something, which might lead them to think something.

There is an engagement with the looker and the reader, but there is also the hearer. So there is

really a triangulated relationship. When I read a painting like *Irascible* (2006) out loud, I became aware of a series of half and full rhymes. The painting is like sound poetry.

That's where voice enters the picture. Usually they're not read out loud, so it's in your head. It is you reading it to yourself, which is an interesting bifurcation. I am interested in the sound of the words, whether you read them aloud or to yourself. I am interested in a certain rhythm, in a certain metre, but it is not poetry.



So you're not a concrete poet. The reincarnation of *Something Else Press* wouldn't be publishing a book of your paintings?

I don't think concrete poetry has the same concept of narrative. But there is an equal delight in the nature of language itself. I have friends who are part of the Language Poetry movement in Berkeley and whose poetry I like a lot, but that's not what I'm doing.

On the other hand, visually you can take a word like "gobbledygook" and the rendering of the

Oh Well, 2010, oil and acrylic on two canvases, 100 x 75 inches.

painting can reflect the nature of the word, so there is a kind of synchronicity.

Yes, synchronicity, self-referentiality, self-criticality. I find humour in all that, too. Certain words are just funny. Just keep saying "gobbledygook." The repetition takes you someplace. In making a painting like that, I don't know what I want it to look like when I start. As I make it I find out what it wants to look like.

The question of humour is critical in the work. In *Master of the Universe* there is a sense of humour in the phrase "gotcha by the balls," but it is also not funny. There is a line in a poem by Michael Ondaatje where he mentions Stephen Crane and he writes that "even his jokes were exceedingly drastic." That's the way I read some of your paintings. That's good, that's really good.

You often use colour in a way that would be counterintuitive to the message of the painting. It is surprising to find a painting with complementary colours and you suddenly realize that its message is not complementary. Like *Drop Dead*.

I assume that is a conscious way of using colour?

Conscious, sure, but also intuitive. I don't want to make the colour obvious, like paint the word "angry" in red. In that sense, I want the paintings to disappoint expectations.

What do you mean?

If you're looking for a "message in the bottle," you're not going to find one.

So is the process one in which you'll get a word in your head from reading or overhearing something, and that will be the ignition for that particular painting?

I like that "point of ignition," but you never know when it's going to happen. Many years ago when both my kids were living at home, one was in high school and one was in grade school, listening to them talk was like living in a language factory. I would hear stuff and say, "Wow, that is a really interesting word, I can use that." Sometimes I would overhear a conversation on the subway or read something in the newspaper and that would get me thinking. The words could come from anywhere. What I was trying to understand is how we talk now.

And then you go to the thesaurus?

I'll look a word up and see where it goes. But now because of the Internet there are so many sources for words, a lot of specialized sites, a lot of obscene sites. Several years ago I discovered a virulent anti-Semitic site that gave me the vocabulary for *Jew* (2008), a painting that upset some people.

It's not a pleasant lexicon.

No, it leads to a very dark place. But it seemed important to shine a light on it.

Is the counterbalance to it *The Joys of Yiddish* (2010)?

I didn't do it as a counterbalance. I called it *The Joys of Yiddish* having grown up in a home where the language was spoken. We weren't orthodox like the Hasidim in Brooklyn but we, more or less, followed all the laws.

Do you think your father's being a sign painter had any influence on you?

I've wrestled with that question for a long time. How could the answer be "no"? Against my will I was drafted as his assistant and apprentice. I wasn't happy that he made me practise and practise. As a kid, what did I learn? What did I take away? Well, a couple of things. First: how to work and respect your materials. Second: don't squeeze your brush!

One of the variations you employ is the arrangement of letters on the page, so you break with the convention of reading from left to right. I'm thinking of a painting like *Block Head* (2016), where things begin to shift around. What advantage does that give you?

A sense of freedom. The stamps opened the possibility of changing the reading orientation. Upside down or sideways, or even backwards. It became a whole new ball game. That's the thrill at the end of the day.

And it's consistent with the notion that you want the viewer to do some work as well, because you have to read that painting in a different way. First of all, you have to turn your head and you have to find which word will act as the bridge to the words on the other two sides. Looking at a painting like that is a much more complicated read.

Yes.

It occurs to me that "Blah, Blah, Blah" is a very useful phrase because you can abstract it more easily. From a painterly point of view, you seem to be able to do more things with it.

I think that's true. I did the first one around the year 2000. But it sat around for a while before I realized that there was more buried there. It turns out to have almost inexhaustible meanings, which fluctuate by the way it's painted. The question is: Is its meaning outside or inside the painting? "Blah, Blah, Blah" has different interpretations ranging from agreement to disgust. But essentially it's just an expulsion of air out of your mouth. It's sublinguistic, barely even a word. So it can mean anything, everything or nothing.

Your paintings almost always end with a comma, as if to continue. So that orthographic decision carries a philosophical position?

Absolutely, except for one painting.

Doesn't one end with an exclamation point? You use them a lot in the body of the text, but almost never at the end. You also have one with an ellipsis.

Yes. There are ones that end with exclamation points and I have one or two with ellipses. And one that ends with a period: *Die* (2005).

Should we read much into the punctuation of the paintings?
Why shouldn't you?

I'm asking whether you do or not.

Of course I do. It all means something. It means something when I use capital letters, or when I use commas. It has a meaning that both plays on its use in the painting and plays off its use in the world.

Barnett Newman says that "to continue" is to begin again, and "to continue" is also the last of the instructions in Richard Serra's *Verb List* from 1967–68. That list is all infinitives and a few prepositional phrases. He says that drawing is a verb. If drawing is a verb, what's painting?

Well, I've said that painting is gerundical.

What makes the gerund perfect is that it partakes of two conditions at the same time. It is a verb that functions as a noun. I see your work operating in that double space. Is that a quest or is it just the nature of human life, that these two spaces are always simultaneously occupied?

It just seems to me that's the way things are. You want to make your work part of the way things are, yet simultaneously against the way things are. That's the meaning of the "double space" to me.

You talked about wanting to make a mark by doing something new, which you did in your early criticism. When you reviewed the "Primary Structures" exhibition at the Jewish Museum in 1966, you were only 24 years old but you came on like gangbusters. What gave you the confidence?

I really don't know. I never set out to be a writer. I was broke and needed a job and I got an interview with the editor of *Arts Magazine*. He asked if I'd done any art reviewing and I said, "No." "Well, you've done some writing?" and I said, "Not really." "Well, what makes you think you can do this?" "Because I've read them and they don't look like they're that hard to do." He started laughing and handed me a "tryout" sheet with 30 shows. The idea was that every show you wrote about, you got paid \$2.50, whether they published it or not. Thirty times \$2.50 was \$75 and my rent was \$21 a month, so I was doing okay writing reviews. I worked my way up and then I heard the "Primary Structures" show was coming and I said I'd like to review it. Turned out mine was the only positive review of that exhibition. Hard to believe, but everyone else slammed it. I didn't know any of the artists, never met any of them. I wrote about them because their work was the most provocative and they seemed to be interested in certain ideas I was interested in, particularly phenomenology. For me, as an artist, they were the edge.

You do reviews where you're making things up. Your quotations are real, attributed, invented and lies. What I'm getting at is that you understood something instinctively about how to do something that was new. Nobody else was doing this kind of thing. And you collaborated with Smithson.

I think making something new grows out of an exasperation with the way things are. A desire to think them differently. When

Smithson and I approached Sam Edwards, the editor at *Arts Magazine*, our idea for "Domain of the Great Bear" grew out of our initial frustration with the way dealers would always ask to see your slides. "Would you come to my studio?" "No, we don't do studios but send me your slides." We figured, what the hell; why do artwork? Just make a slide and send that to the gallery. That led to, "Well, if a slide is a reproduction, can a reproduction become an original? Can we turn that relationship inside out?" A magazine is a secondary source; it's all reproductions. Could we make it into a primary source? What we needed was some kind of ostensible subject that would make sense in an art magazine. We were having lunch across the street from the planetarium and we thought it would be funny to write a review of the planetarium as a museum. Sam thought it was a great idea and he gave us eight pages and freedom to do the layout. But we didn't tell him anything about our real intention, which was to plant a time bomb inside the art system. We got press passes so that we could get into the photo archives of the planetarium. I wrote part of the article and Bob wrote part and part of it we wrote together. We worked out the layout together.

Sections of the article show the mark of Smithson's writing.

Yes, he wrote the last two pages with the photographs of catastrophes and I wrote the first two pages about the materiality of the building and the exhibits. There is a long section that is my parody of Judd—"Ten windows are clear and transparent. Four are green. Three are red. Two are blue. One is of an indeterminate cast."—which was both poking fun at his Hemingway style and an homage because he was so important to us.

Important as an adversary?

Yes, important as an adversary. The *Working Drawings* book started out as a show of drawings, but when I brought them into the gallery, the director, who had commissioned me to do the show, said, "I'm not going to pay to frame this shit." Fortunately, the school had invested in the latest technology called the Xerox machine. So I said, "Okay, I'll xerox them all," thinking I would just pin the Xeroxes to the wall. But after the drawings were xeroxed, they came out all the same size and format and already looked like a book. At that point I decided I could return the drawings. I called everybody and told them I didn't need the actual drawings because they were going to be xeroxed and shown as four books, which I now considered to be a work of mine. Nobody had a problem except for Judd. He said, "I don't understand. If you xerox a drawing of mine, how does it become a work of yours?" In his own way he was the only one who really got the radicality of it. Eventually he agreed, even if he still remained somewhat skeptical.

History has a way of making us aware of what we've done, but you couldn't have known how important that exhibition was going to be.

The way I say it is, "history is what happens behind your back." At the time it didn't get a single review. The director of the gallery called the PR department of Xerox Corporation and said an artist has made this work using Xerox and their response was, "Oh, that's great, we're going to send a writer and a photographer

KIBBITZER, KVET-
 CHER, K'NOCKER,
 NUDZH, NUDNICK,
 NEBBISH, GONIF,
 TUMLER, TSITSER,
 MESHUGENER, SH-
 MOOZER, SCHMO,
 SHLEMIEL, SHLIM-
 AZEL, SHVITZER,
 ALTER KOCKER,
 PISHER, PLOSER,
 PLATKE-MACHER.

The Joys of Yiddish, 2012, oil and acrylic
 on two canvases, 100 x 85 inches.
 Collection of Jewish Museum, New York.

down there and we'll get you some publicity." So the guy comes down and he looks at the book and he looks at me and says, "But it's just a Xerox. There's supposed to be a work of art here." I said, "Yes, that's the work of art." I don't know what he was expecting but four books of Xeroxes were not it. Luckily the photographer decided he might as well take some photos. Otherwise there would have been no record of the exhibition. A lot of artists came to the opening. It was a very lively opening and then it was on to the next thing. But about six months later you started seeing "book" exhibitions popping up in art galleries.

The American poet Robert Duncan has the idea that "if you don't enter the dance, you mistake the event." What he was getting at was if you had gone

to see a performance by Martha Graham and expected to see dancers en pointe, then not only will you not be able to enter the dance but you'll also be a lousy dance critic. It says something about the need to find a language appropriate to the thing being written about. To come back to language, that seemed to be what you were all about, finding a language that made sensible the world in which you were living and making. That's really what criticism was for all of you.

I can't speak for anybody else. Everybody was coming at writing from a different angle and they were both complementary and competitive. At the time an artist who wrote was considered a heretic. But Reinhardt and Judd were two important models. As were Godard and Truffaut, who wrote to prepare the world for films they had yet to make.

Among my immediate contemporaries, I think Dan Graham had a poet's sense of language, and his writing was much more sociologically inclined. Smithson was just a terrific writer. He was very well read, which was mysterious, given he had only a high school education. I had some formal art education, some background in philosophy. I liked looking at art. I liked words. I still do.

Liking words brings to my mind your earlier reference to Bloom. I assume you're referring to Harold and not Leopold Bloom, although you do have a painting that ends in "yes" so you could be channelling Joyce's Molly. But Harold Bloom's contention is that things are constantly misinterpreted, that we're involved with a map of misreading. I get the sense that if you were a cartographer, that's the map you'd be using for navigation.

Absolutely. I have said many times that for a work to remain relevant, it has to be continuously re-misunderstood. The initial misreading is only the beginning. It has to happen again and again. A prime example of that was Smithson's show at the Whitney many years ago. The *New York Times* did a full-page Sunday feature called "Robert Smithson: Ecological Artist." Now this is a guy who had proposed placing broken glass on an island where birds mated in Puget Sound and who poured asphalt down the side of a hill in Rome. He was not an ecological artist, but through that lens his work took on a new relevance. It was a total misunderstanding. As it was misunderstood the first time, it had to continue to be re-misunderstood.

Is all language necessarily a palimpsest, so that when you enter its terrain, you're always entering previously occupied spaces? Yes. The thing with synonyms, which Roget himself first said, is that no two words ever mean the same thing. You're moving through different shades and approximations of meaning. That was something I was thinking about in regards to the colour in the "Thesaurus" paintings. I never used the same colour twice in the same painting. They all had to shade off somehow, like synonyms. I would make a drawing recording every colour that went into every letter, and there are a couple of hundred letters in each painting. For example, *Oh Well* (2010). "Oh" was in Old Holland yellow green, "well" was in Williamsburg brilliant yellow, plus pale grey and cadmium yellow medium. "That's" was in Gamblin quinacridone violet with a touch of Holbein grey and white. "Goes" was Williamsburg persian rose pure. Some of them got really complicated. "To" was Holbein light red earth and Old Holland yellow ochre deep and Williams cadmium orange and Gamblin Portland grey medium and Old Holland warm grey light plus white, plus Williams quinacridone maroon. This was my shopping list.

That list sounds like poetry to me. I am also interested in knowing how much the painterly tradition matters to you.

There are so many things that you can do with paint. But they all come hard-wired with historical precedents. Let me put it this way: poets don't have to make up the words they use. There are hundreds of thousands of words in the English language and somebody else has used every word before you. I think that surface, texture, shape, colour, all the traditional aspects of

painting, are referents but they're also, in a way, empty signifiers. So if you can find a way to use something in a different way, it's yours. There's a constant battle between necessity and use. I mean, the drips have a literal use for me, signifying the fluidity of language and the draining of meaning. They also indicate that the painting was painted vertically. That gravity was a visual force. If they remind someone of Morris Louis or somebody else, that's fine with me; it only multiplies the range of references.

Would you like everything in the painting to be instrumentalized in some way? That it has some meaning beyond how it sits on the surface? Is that an aspiration?

I never thought of it quite that way. I don't think anybody has that much control over what they do, so to aspire to that would probably be futile. But you do try to get as much as you can out of whatever you've got.

***Oh Well* makes me think that there is a kind of resignation, a way of living that's built into the text.**

Absolutely. That painting is an homage to my mother. She was a person who was resigned to the way the world is.

Her world or the world at large?

Her world and the world at large were more or less the same thing. My parents were immigrants, so they found a reality that they didn't help create and that they couldn't change. That's the way it is. Shit happens. Learn to live with it. Now, is that novelistic? I don't know. But it is the narrative of a life.

You have said that in one sense there is no progress and that originality is not something you look for. If that's the case, does that make all art a kind of ritual?

What I meant was, originality isn't something that can be willed. I don't believe in progress per se but I do think there is an edge and you want your work to find it or, again in a Bloomian sense, to transgress it. Is that originality? It's not progress but I think it is the way we look for meaning in art. You look for something that shows an understanding of what went before, but that takes it to a new place. That's why de Kooning and Pollock were so obsessed with Picasso, because he had taken art to a new place and they had to find a way beyond him. He was the edge. And I think there is a natural progression from AbEx to pop and minimalism. What came next had to come next. That sounds deterministic but if you wanted to paint figuratively after abstract expressionism, what are you going to do? Richard Diebenkorn? No, Lichtenstein and Warhol are figurative painting after abstract expressionism, because they found a way around Pollock and de Kooning. I know all the arguments against that point of view and it may be that in the current era of pluralism, there is no edge. But I think there is, and you'll never find it if you stop looking. ■

WILCH

Mel Bochner: *Voices*

By Roberta Smith

THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, JUNE 16, 2017



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND PETER FREEMAN INC.

MEL BOCHNER

Through June 24. Peter Freeman Inc., 140 Grand Street, Manhattan; 212-966-5154, peterfreemaninc.com.

In “Voices” at Peter Freeman Inc., Mel Bochner’s new paintings are noisier than ever. The fusion of slang, color, emotion and process that this erstwhile Conceptualist has pursued on canvas for the past two decades has become more intensely enmeshed and crazed. Previous paintings confronted us with solid walls of fat letters spelling out synonymic insults and dismissals, often profane; they were colorful in both language and hue. Now the words have broken rank, slipping and sliding through the brushwork and slurred colors, in

and out of sight, still hurling insults that increasingly implicate art.

With its title stuttering and dissolving amid heavy strokes of blue and black, “Gobbledygook” (2015) covers a lot of ground: painting, talking, thinking. In white on red, “Drool” (2016) messily enumerates synonyms for nonsense, while its title summons the liquidity of both paint and aged mouths. The white-on-black “Amazing!” (2015) has some of the orderliness of previous work, except that its stack of superlatives (“Cool!” “OMG!”) is contradicted at the bottom with “Shut Up!” There’s a more haywire, if identically titled version in white on red.

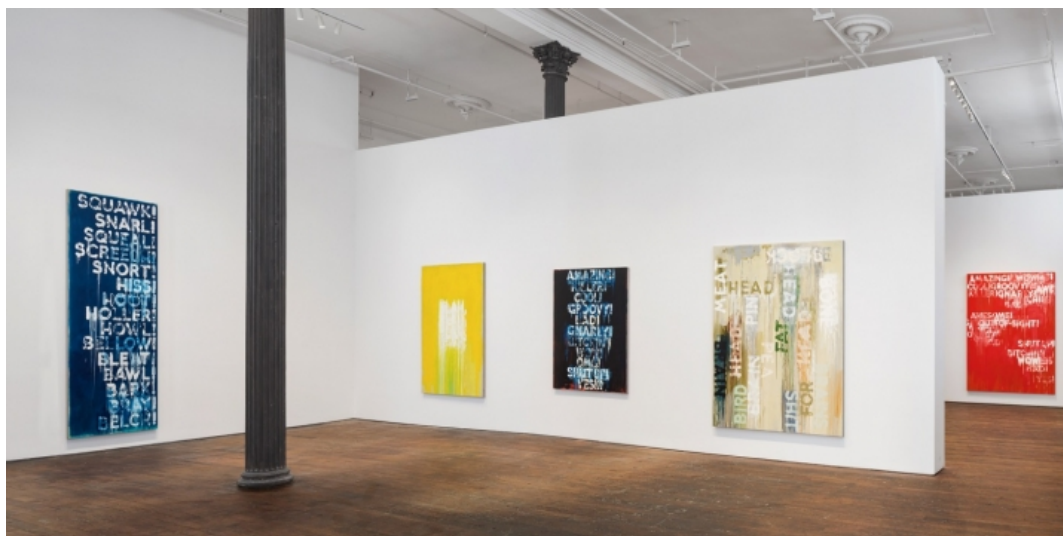
As if by way of explanation, one canvas repeats the words of a well-known Conceptual work by the artist, “Language Is Not Transparent”; another elaborates thoughtfully on a quote from Cézanne.

I miss the unequivocal frontality of the earlier paintings, with their blustering walls of words. There are adolescent moments here (dollar signs and exclamation points) and paint handling that resembles Abstract Expressionist do-overs. But Mr. Bochner seems intent on freeing his brush the same way he previously freed his tongue, and id. He is approaching his late 70s, forging ahead.

HYPERALLERGIC

Mel Bochner's Linguistic Trickery

By Seph Rodney | 20 June 2017



The artist's paintings at Peter Freeman, Inc. move language from mere representation to lived experience.

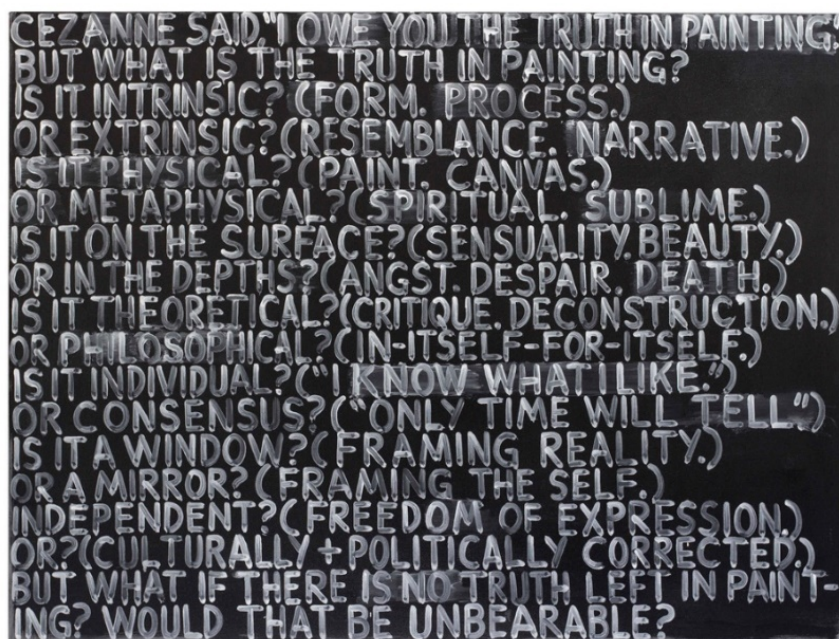
What's the point of creating paintings with text? Some of Mel Bochner's pieces in his exhibition *Voices* at Peter Freeman, Inc. show me. One of the works that best exploits the recruitment of language into the realm of painting is "Squawk" (2016), which gives a gleeful rundown of various words like the title: "SNORT!," "SQUEAL!," "HOOT!," "HOLLER!," "HOWL!," "BELLOW!," and "BAWL!," among them. They're all in caps, all punctuated with exclamation points as if urgent or intended as imperatives. Each calls to mind the kind of sound it indicates, so I feel impelled to enact it, at least in my own head — I think of what a snort sounds like, and language moves from mere representation to lived experience. Bochner does a similar thing with "Amazing!" (2015), but here the emphasis is on words that convey the ginned-up enthusiasm of PR employees hawking their clients' wares or interviewers talking to celebrities on the red carpet: "OMG!," "SHUT UP!," "YES!!!" I get the feeling that Bochner had fun making these paintings.

In a different vein, there is the very clever "Blah, Blah, Blah" (2016), not the yellow one, but the one on the orange painted canvas. Bochner sets the repeating "blah"s at an angle, repeatedly imprinted over each other as if made with a rubber stamp. The words drip, their white pigment intermingling with the orange background, like a voice trailing off at the end of a sentence when the speaker has run out of steam. I genuinely love the simple trickery of "Yes!/No! Maybe" (2016), which clumps the "yes"s and "no"s in the top half of the canvas on a black background, while leaving one solitary, imperious "maybe" on the bottom in a field of gray. It's a field of experience where most of us live a good deal of the time.

ARTNEWS

Is Truth Zilch?: Mel Bochner's Show at Peter Freeman Thrives on Misinterpretation

By Robin Scher - 26 May 2017

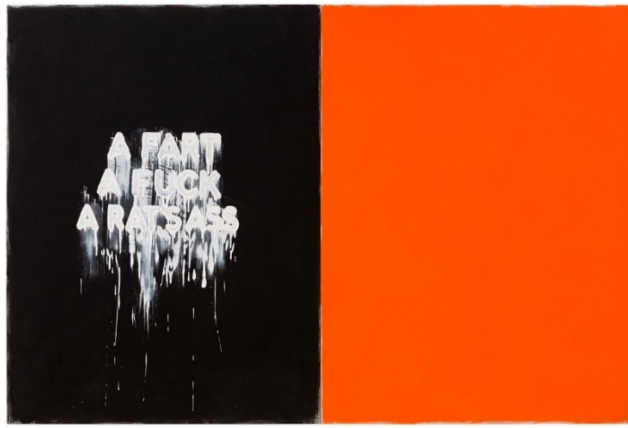


Cezanne Said, 2016, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches.

Having long ago established himself as a pioneering conceptual artist, Mel Bochner took a detour in the early 1990s and began painting works in which words constituted the sole image. Was this an extension of his earlier practice? Yet another kind of exercise in blending philosophy and art? Or was it something less profound—perhaps even a bit of a prank? In “Voices” at Peter Freeman Gallery, this uncertain tension remains at the heart of Bochner’s practice.

The first of several questions in the black-and-white painting *Cezanne Said* (2016) comes after a quotation: CEZANNE SAID, “I OWE YOU THE TRUTH IN PAINTING.” BUT WHAT IS THE TRUTH IN PAINTING? They are the first words you see entering the exhibition. Call it Bochner’s opening salvo. Or, rather, those of a character Bochner inhabits. Either way we’re left with the words and their nihilistic underpinnings.

Language Is Not Transparent (2016) may offer another clue. Here the words of the title, painted repeatedly one over the other, blur the phrase itself to the point that it renders meaning in a sort of visual onomatopoeia—a kind of visceral sense. This motif is repeated across several works in the show, all painted in the past two years. In each one, a different word, phrase, or platitude is “obliterated into a palimpsest of illegibility,” as Jeremy Sigler writes in his catalogue essay.



A Fart..., 2016, oil on canvas, in two parts, overall: 48 x 72 inches.

In a 2006 interview with the *Brooklyn Rail*'s Phong Bui, Bochner offered a glimpse into his relationship with language. Commenting on how people read his paintings, he said that “a work of art lives by being continuously misinterpreted.” So how then could one interpret, or misinterpret, Bochner’s paintings?

We know that language is not to be trusted. Perhaps this is the paradoxical “truth” to these paintings. Simply put, truth—in words, paintings, and by extension, their interpretations—is simply a construct.

A FART, A FUCK, A RAT’S ASS—all terms that could be prefixed by the words “I don’t give...”—make up the composition of *A Fart...* (2016). Here Bochner’s voice of dissent rings loud. But what that voice specifically refers to is less clear. One possible answer might be found in the last lines of *Cezanne Said*: BUT WHAT IF THERE IS NO TRUTH LEFT IN PAINT-ING? WOULD THAT BE UNBEARABLE?

The implication of these words could be hard to swallow. Bochner, however, seems to be having a grand time, regardless of the absence of deeper meaning. Though this too could be further misinterpretation.

Here’s another interpretation: Bochner, agonizing over what Sigler describes as his “debilitated existential state of alienation,” has managed to fight off ennui, at least enough to produce the vivid canvasses that currently fill Peter Freeman Gallery. Having done so, we are left with the red, green, yellow, and black blueprints of this inner turmoil.



Zilch, 2016, oil and acrylic on canvas, 30 x 24 inches.

One last work stands out from the rest: It only contains a single painted word—ZILCH.

Thesaurus Paintings

By Teddy Larsy – Spring 2015



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the PARIS REVIEW

**HILARY
MANTEL**

**LYDIA
DAVIS**

and

**ELENA
FERRANTE**

three interviews

JAMES LASDUN

a novella

MEL BOCHNER

portfolio



Talk is Cheap, 2014
oil on canvas, 28" x 32".

MEL BOCHNER

INTERVIEWER

Why did you start making text-based art?

BOCHNER

One reason I focus on ordinary language is because everybody can read it and have some personal reference point. I imagine that people in the literary world see the work differently from people in the art world, but really, anybody can see it any way they want.

To me, the emotional trajectory of the painting is how one gets from the first word to the last word—from the prim and proper to the crude and vulgar. I concentrate a lot on the sense and sound of the language. The flow of words has to have a certain kind of rhythm—or a certain kind of lack of rhythm. That's how the narrative of the painting is constructed.

INTERVIEWER

Do you read your pieces aloud as you work?

BOCHNER

I do read them aloud. But I assume that most people will read them with their own silent inner voice. I'll never know the kind of inflection that anyone else brings to their reading of my work. In another sense, the "voice" of the paintings themselves changes depending on the context in which they're seen. In my studio, they would seem to represent my voice, but if you see them on the wall of a gallery or museum, or in the pages of *The Paris Review*, the question becomes, Who's speaking? And there's no way to define who the speaker is. So it's language estranged—speech divorced from any speaker.

INTERVIEWER

How do you choose the first word in a thesaurus piece, and how do the other words come into being?

BOCHNER

I don't always know where the first word comes from. It might come from my reading or seeing something on TV or something one of my kids says or something that just pops into my head. But once it hooks into my brain, I begin to explore the synonyms in a thesaurus. I start by making lists in a notebook, then letting the words tell me—by arranging and rearranging them—what they want to say. From countless lists, a painting emerges. Somebody asked me once, What's the difference between this and poetry? I think there's an enormous difference, both in terms of opticality and physicality. The type of letter that I'm using—I think of myself as a painter of letters—the way they're painted, carefully or loosely, the way the color interacts with the ground, the way the paint handling itself becomes a language—all these factors transform the text in unpredictable ways. So the logic of the text is set against the viewing of the painting, creating a friction between the eye and the mind, seeing and reading.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever try to blur the line between seeing and reading, between a painting and a poem?

BOCHNER

I can see how people might read these paintings as a kind of poetry, but

what's at stake for me is finding new ways to engage viewers in the act of looking. Because, above all else, I consider these abstract paintings.

INTERVIEWER

So you've never had writer's block?

BOCHNER

Not really. I'm not even sure what writer's block is. Using words and having this vast treasure house of language to play around in—there is always some way to get back into my work, some avenue to explore what I'm feeling or thinking.

INTERVIEWER

Does a viewer need to know the evolution of your work in order to understand these thesaurus paintings?

BOCHNER

I don't think it's necessary. There is a great deal of my work that's still unknown, that's rarely, if ever, been shown. So it really isn't possible for anyone, including me, to understand it in its entirety. If and when it does become known, both the continuities and the discontinuities will become self-evident. So if someone is only interested in what I am doing now, that's okay, and if they are only interested in what I did forty years ago, that's okay, too.

INTERVIEWER

How did the "Blah" paintings come about?

BOCHNER

I actually had the idea of trying to deal with the sublinguistic a long time ago. But given the way I was working then, on the "Measurement" paintings for instance, I couldn't figure out how to do it. It was only after I started using language again that I picked up a canvas one day and wrote all over it, "blah blah blah blah blah." Since then, it's just sort of taken off on its own.

—*Interviewed by Teddy Lasry*

Mousse Magazine

THE ARTIST AS CURATOR

Issue #6

Mousse 47

Mel Bochner, Working Drawings And Other Visible Things On Paper Not Necessarily Meant To Be Viewed As Art, 1966

By James Mayer

February - March 2015

What I've been trying to do is raise these processes to the level of thought.

—Mel Bochner

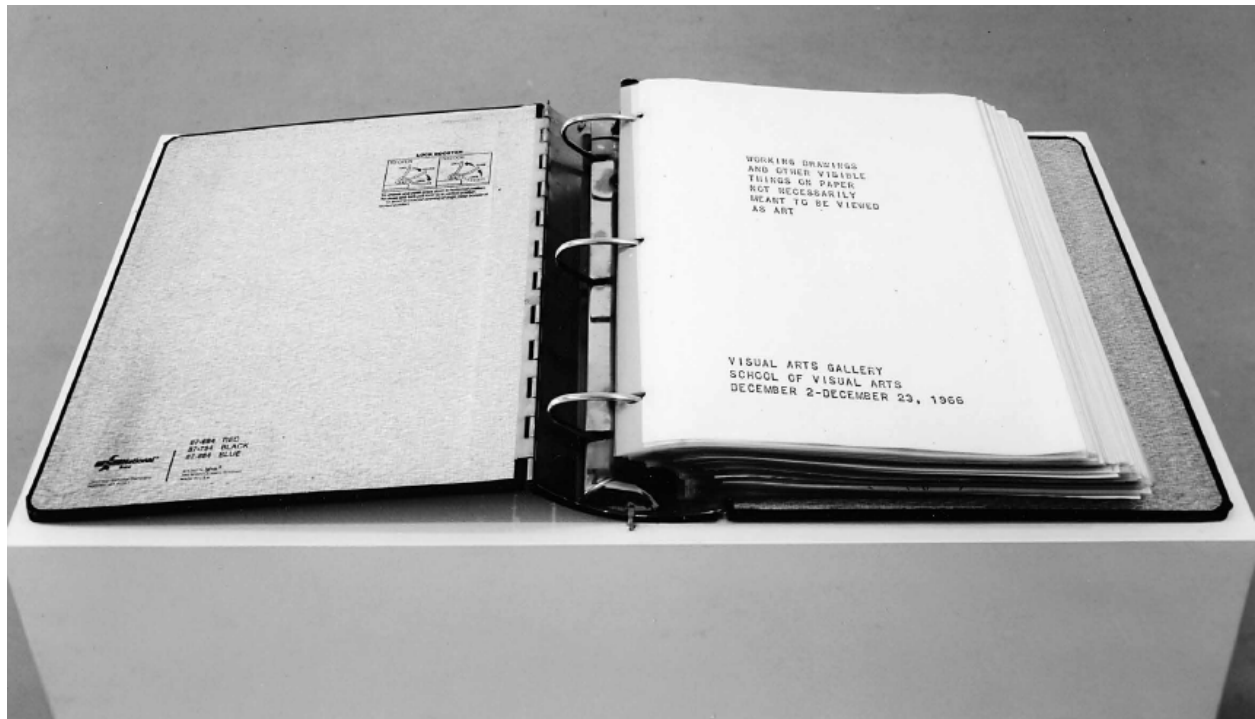
The circumstances leading to the realization of *Working Drawings And Other Visible Things On Paper Not Necessarily Meant To Be Viewed As Art*, Mel Bochner's inaugural show and one of the starting points for a discussion of conceptual art, were not auspicious. As sometimes occurs in such situations, however, limitations (of budget, institutional support) did not hinder, but rather facilitated, a result of unforeseen importance. During the fall of 1966, Bochner, an instructor at the School of Visual Arts in New York, was asked to organize a "Christmas show of drawings." "I went to people whose work I liked [Donald Judd, Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt, Eva Hesse, Dan Graham, Jo Baer, Robert Moskowitz, Robert Smithson, Al Jensen, etc.] and asked them for drawings that weren't necessarily 'works of art.' I brought them to the gallery director. She said, 'What the hell are these?' She also said: 'We don't have enough money to frame them.'"ⁱⁱ

How to save the cost of frames? He would photograph the drawings. They were, after all, only *working drawings*, proposals for projects to be realized in other forms. "Not necessarily art" (yet not exactly not-art), their status as "originals" was ambiguous.ⁱⁱⁱ To show them in reproduction wouldn't compromise their identity: They weren't "works" to begin with.

Yet photography, like frames, was rejected as too costly an expenditure for the privately owned art school. Which led to another solution: The school had recently bought a large Xerox machine. As a member of the art history rather than studio faculty, Bochner had unlimited access to this latest technological wonder. Xerography, observed Marshall McLuhan at the time, allows everyone to be their own publishing company. Bochner took this dictum to heart, photocopying the drawings, reducing and enlarging them to uniform size.

There was no precedent, in 1966, for presenting photocopies within a gallery setting. The sheets demanded to be stacked, yet there were too few to compose a book. Bochner sought out other, anonymous materials (pages from *Scientific American*) and projects by other intellectual workers: mathematicians

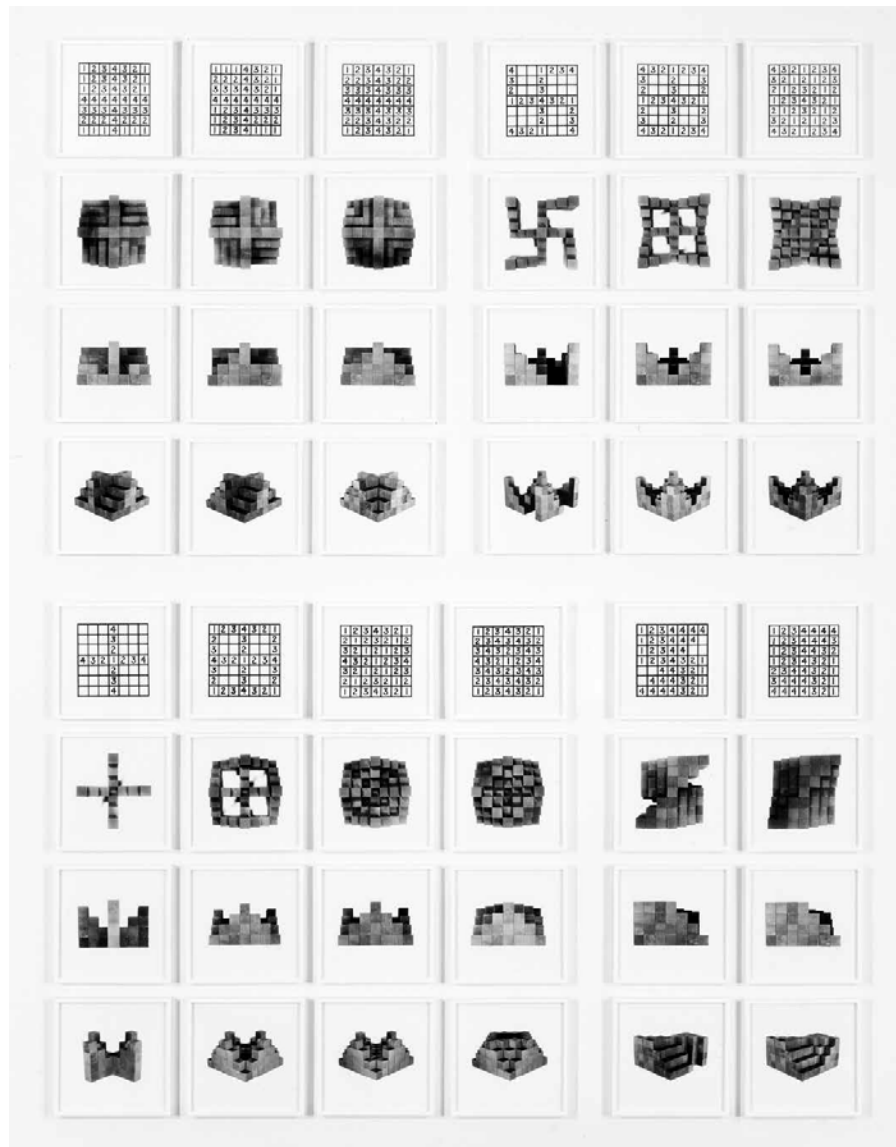
(Arthur Babakhanian of the University of Illinois), biologists (one M. Carsiodes), engineers and architects (James Ingo Freed; the firm Tippetts-Abbett-McCarthy-Stratton), musicians (Karlheinz Stockhausen, John Cage) and choreographers (Tom Clancy). Bochner arranged the drawings in alphabetical order. As a frontispiece he included a floor plan with measurements of the gallery; on the final page, a diagram of the Xerox machine. Bochner's work—the first of many “Xerox books” of those years—was nearly complete.



Installation view of *Working Drawings And Other Visible Things On Paper Not Necessarily Meant To Be Viewed As Art*, School of Visual Arts, New York, 1966

The Xerox machine allowed for endless reproducibility. Why limit the show to a single volume? Bochner thus presented four books, mounting each on a white, wooden pedestal. The plinths reached the height of a table (reading level), yet no chairs were provided. In other words, the viewer was forced to stand, hunched over, as he or she turned each page. To peruse the *Working Drawings* takes a considerable amount of time, as one attempts to decode each of the 100 projects, written in the notations of different languages and disciplines. To view them standing up is exhausting—an impossible feat. Bochner, in his inaugural work, did not aim to please: He made the viewer *uncomfortable*.

Among the practices we refer to as conceptual, some claim to precede others; some are equated with a group, others less so; some claim a Duchampian origin, which others resist; some call themselves “conceptual,” while others refuse this identification. Thirty years after the fact, conceptualism comes into view as a field of difference: a set of individual, at times contradictory investigations of visual form and linguistically construed ideas; analyses of meaning-as-such and the discursive conditions of meaning’s production. We might, at this point, refer not to “conceptualism” but conceptualisms; we might trace specific trajectories, distinct points of emergence, rather than provide an overarching point of view.^{iv}



Mel Bochner, *36 Photographs and 12 Diagrams* (1966)

What is the position of the *Working Drawings* within this field? Reflecting on the contemporaneous *36 Photographs and 12 Diagrams* [1966], Bochner recently remarked: “Among my earliest works . . . were black and white photographs of sculptures made with little wooden cubes that I took apart after the photo was shot. This was because I wanted to do something where the sculptural object was not the issue. They were works *about* sculpture, not ‘sculpture.’ That way, what was being focused on was the *process* of making art.”^v

Why this fixation on process? The *Working Drawings* were foremost a reading of *practice* (“I went to people whose work I liked”). And the work that appealed to Bochner especially at this juncture was the activity critics increasingly referred to as “minimal.” Understandably, for 1966 was the season of this work’s ascendance, with Judd’s first appearance at Castelli, LeWitt’s presentation of white cubic lattices at Dwan, Andre’s “brick show” at Tibor de Nagy, *Art in Process: The Visual Development of a Structure* at Finch College, *10*, a group show at Dwan, and the Jewish Museum’s enormous *Primary Structures*, the

exhibition which, receiving extensive coverage in *Newsweek* and *Life*, brought this work to the public's attention.

Bochner, who had just begun to write criticism for *Arts Magazine* (inspired, one suspects, by the example of Judd, who had published there since 1959), reviewed most of these shows. In these texts we catch a glimpse of a young artist coming to terms with those activities he found most convincing, practices next to which he would position his own work. His review of *Primary Structures* was unequivocal:

In this exhibition the best work is by Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt, Don Judd, Robert Morris, Robert Smithson. The addition of "dilutants" and mannerists to this exhibition (in the name, no doubt, of a "good show") does not dissolve the issues the best work raises. . . . Sculptors such as the Park Place group [Edwin Ruda, Forrest Myers, Robert Grosvenor, among others], the Richard Feigen group [David Hall, William Tucker, Gerald Laing, Derrick Woodham] and the Pace Gallery group [e.g., Larry Bell] . . . may be dismissed in a discussion of New Art.^{vi}

Bochner's selection has to some extent been ratified by later opinion, yet at the time his taste was shared by few. Why *these* artists? "They were involved in ideas, and that was what I was interested in."^{vii} The most important of these "ideas" was the minimal investigation of seriality as a means for motivating artistic process. Motivation—the attempt to purge one's work of decision making, the relocation of formal impetus to external forces—an enterprise of prewar Dada and Constructivism, had returned in the postwar context of Black Mountain College. In Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* [1951] and *Factum I* and *Factum II* [1957], in Jasper Johns' *Number Paintings* [1958], the repetition of a preselected unit or format predicted the work's outcome. Later, Frank Stella developed his stripe patterns from the width and edge of the support or a pregiven figure.^{viii} During the late 1950s and early 1960s, this activity was increasingly seen as an antidote to the gestural emotionalism of second-generation Abstract Expressionism, the part-by-part compositions turned out by followers of Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline. "Di Suvero uses beams as if they were brushstrokes, imitating movement, as Kline did," Judd complained. "A beam thrusts, a piece of iron follows a gesture; together they form a naturalistic and anthropomorphic image."^{ix} To escape this bind Judd recommended serial method, among other motivating strategies. Seriality, however logical, he argued, was "not rationalistic and underlying but simply order, like that of continuity, one thing after another."^x Bochner endorsed this view: "For me the use of self-generating procedures to make art was a liberation from the limitations of my own ego. It represented an escape from individualism by the objectification of process. I remember believing that it may be the means of achieving Flaubert's dream of the annihilation of the author."^{xi}

Seriality is only alluded to in "Specific Objects." It was, for Judd, *merely* a method, a means. Whereas Bochner transformed systemic method into an object of reflection, a *cause*. The culmination of his analysis, in both ambition and historical range, was the article "The Serial Attitude," published in *Artforum* in 1967.^{xii} Seriality, Bochner claimed, was less a recent innovation than a "method" traceable to the previous century: Eadweard Muybridge's photographs of athletes, Thomas Eakins's perspective studies, and Stella's canvases could all be characterized as "serial." Seriality in this sense was distinct from "working in series," that is, the production of versions of a theme (de Kooning's *Women*, Morandi's paintings of bottles). The latter was still a mimetic enterprise; it was still embroiled in the rationalist enterprise of projecting *a priori* meanings onto a perceived world.^{xiii}

Bochner described the *variety* of serial method: In addition to repetition, permutation, rotation, reversal, and progression could be used. Assisted by mathematicians (Babakhanian worked with LeWitt), the minimalists explored increasingly sophisticated formats, such as the inverse natural number progression (1–1 / 2+1 / 3–1 / 4+1 / 5) and the Fibonacci sequence. The *Working Drawings* revealed how artists were employing the different schema described in "The Serial Attitude." In place of a Judd progression one

found a Judd drawing; in place of Flavin's monumental *Nominal Three* [1963] a mere diagram; in place of LeWitt's open white cubes a sheet of calculations. In addition, Bochner included plans for his own projects, such as the layout of blocks that would appear in *36 Photographs and 12 Diagrams*, and the drawing for the cardboard sculpture *Three-Way Fibonacci Progression* [1966].

A second aspect of minimal art, inextricable from seriality, was its recourse to factory production. One of the most remarkable items in the *Working Drawings* is an invoice. Addressed to Donald Judd, 53 East 19th Street, New York, NY 10003, dated September 1, 1966, it is from Bernstein Bros., the Long Island City welder the artist patronized at the time. That year was busy, as we have seen, and the bill indicates that Judd had several works made. The expense of these commissions (\$3,051.16) was considerable. Yet the trouble was worth it. Factory production was the next step in Judd's search for the "Specific Object," an object purged of authorial expression and rational meaning (previously, he built his works himself). New materials were for him an expediency, a means to produce works of a certain formal quality. A recourse to mechanized procedures was hardly new in 20th-century art—Lucy Lippard cited the notorious case of Moholy-Nagy ordering works over the phone—yet never had this strategy invited more antagonism. For this reason, the work of Judd and others was characterized as "minimal." Before it devolved into a neutral term in the late 1960s, the "minimal" (in the tradition of other avant-gardist style labels) was a term of deprecation, on two counts: formal "reduction" (simplification of shape, internal organization, et cetera), as well as authorial "abdication."^{xiv} Devoid of traces of the artist's hand (so valorized in Abstract Expressionist aesthetics), this work did not sufficiently resemble "art." "I think my friend Don Judd can't qualify as an artist because he doesn't *do* the work," Mark di Suvero argued at the time. "A man has to make a thing in order to be an artist."^{xv}

Introducing the readymade and factory production into the realm of formal abstraction, asking that their work be read as "art," the minimalists unwittingly ushered in the Trojan horse of Dada, challenging modernism's self-definition from within. And who understood the character of this attack better than [Clement] Greenberg himself? Minimalism, he complained in a text of 1967, was "Good Design." Conceived in advance, executed in factories or in readymade materials, this work too much resembled the polite appurtenances of middlebrow taste. "Minimal works," Greenberg wrote, "are readable as art, as almost anything is today—including a door, a table, or a blank sheet of paper."^{xvi} Bochner, anticipating this critique, replied: "The New Art of Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt, Don Judd, Robert Morris [and] Robert Smithson . . . is not an 'art-style.' It will not wither with the passing season and go away. It is not engineering. It is not appliances. . . . It will not become academic."^{xvii}

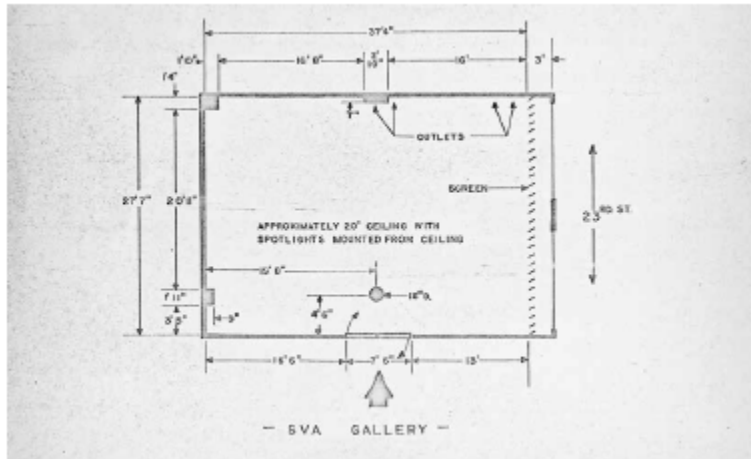
Despite this hopeful prediction, the *Working Drawings* exposed the dependency of minimal art on the readymade, its flirtation with the mechanisms of mass production and consumption. Bochner's installation reconfigures the minimal shape into "furniture," a metaphorical support for an analysis of its own construction. In an allusion to Duchamp, he placed the books on pedestals, sites of art's elevation and display, replacing the "cult value" (in Walter Benjamin's sense) of the fetish-commodity with the "exhibition value," or reproducibility, of the Xerox. At the same time, the *Working Drawings* pointed to a distinction between these historical paradigms, between two concepts of the readymade. Unlike Duchamp's urinal, much minimal work sought out its commodity status (while demonstrating this internal contradiction): Factory materials and techniques were assimilated to a work of formal and financial aspiration, a sculpture whose number must in the end be limited, whose execution and surfaces must be elegant, precise.^{xviii} In the end, the working drawing was *not* the "work."^{xix}

The analysis of seriality opened onto a broader consideration of intellectual processes: hence Bochner's inclusion of notations from *Scientific American*, Babakhanian's proofs, Stockhausen's compositions, Ingo Freed's blueprint of an airport design. So, too, artistic practice (prompted by, and in opposition to, minimalism) had begun to explore other information, other implications of seriality: hence Smithson's plan for the Fort Worth Airport, a project that would have incorporated site-specific installations by

Morris, LeWitt, and Andre; hence Hesse's drawing for a relief whose rows of repeated, protruding rubber hose, each identical yet different, rendered Juddian perspicuity "absurd." ("Series, serial, serial art, is another way of repeating absurdity, Hesse observed."^{xx}) Another noteworthy contribution was Graham's *Side Effects / Common Drugs* [1966]. Seen within the context of the *Working Drawings*, this work revealed how scientific method, in collusion with a rapidly expanding pharmaceutical industry's apparatus of research and production, had opened up a Brave New World of technologized subjectivity. There was, it seemed in the pill-happy 1960s, a "doll" to cure every ill.^{xxi} Yet, like the banal, prefabricated housing pictured in the 1966 *Homes for America* (Graham's witty exposure of the uses of serial logic by postwar developers), these drugs were not altogether benign. The attempt to modify an undesirable behavior caused other maladies, "side effects" that, however predictable, eluded control. The recipient of the stimulant Dexadrine, for example, was placed at risk for anorexia, constipation, hypertension, nausea, insomnia, and even convulsions. Thiopropazate, a tranquilizer, would seem a perfect antidote to a Dexadrine-induced insomnia, yet this in turn induced another chain of effects (blurring of vision, constipation, convulsion, depression, to name a few). In *Side Effects / Common Drugs*, the patient who consumes one medication must take another, and then another; entrapped in this systemic web of symptoms and "cures," he or she is launched into a state of perpetual dependency, beyond rational self-possession. Like the meticulous researchers he parodied, Graham mapped these effects with chilling precision.



Installation view of *Working Drawings And Other Visible Things On Paper Not Necessarily Meant To Be Viewed As Art*, School of Visual Arts, New York, 1966



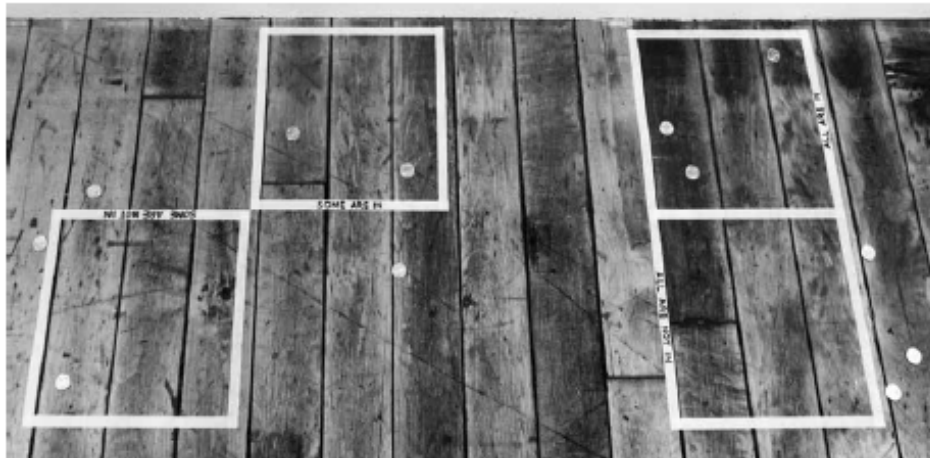
Mel Bochner, Xerox of SVA Gallery Plan (1966)

The *Working Drawings* propose a conceptual art of process, a process art located in the development of an idea. Bochner's "conceptualism" thus emerges as a dynamic model, a thought-activity occurring in the gaps between language and things; a conceptualism comparable, but not reducible, to that of LeWitt, whose *Serial Project 1 (ABCD)*, also 1966, proposed the development of a systemic formula alongside the realized "work."^{xxii} "In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work," LeWitt observed. "When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art."^{xxiii}

The process art of Bochner (who, after the *Working Drawings*, would produce his own serial "works") emerged in opposition to two paradigms. On one hand, it countered that other "conceptualism": the model of "art as idea as idea" proposed by Kosuth, which (in apparent contradiction to his Wittgensteinian inclinations) affixed a transparent relation of sign, idea, and referent, achieving a static art of Mind. "Language," Bochner replied, "is not transparent." (In his installation of this legend, the text is scrawled in chalk on a painted background that drips down the wall [1970]). Viewing one of his works, we are faced with the incommensurability of generative idea and formal outcome, of signs and their visual correspondences.^{xxiv} Equally at odds with a purely linguistic conceptualism, Bochner's work also opposed a materialist process art: in short, the model of "anti-form" associated with Robert Morris. For serial method, Morris claimed in 1968, enforced a disjuncture between conception and realization, *reproducing* the dualistic logic of metaphysics: minimal work was hardly "irrational," but (such damning labels!) "reasonable," "well-built."^{xxv} To remedy this problem he argued for a "direct manipulation of a given material" by the artist, processes that occurred in time ("random piling, loose stacking, hanging").^{xxvi} And so persuasive was this argument (confirmed by the activity of Richard Serra, Keith Sonnier, Bruce Nauman, and others, which Morris presented together in the famous Castelli warehouse show during the same year) that "anti-form" came to seem representative of the entire spectrum of 1960s process work, otherwise referred to as "postminimalism."^{xxvii}

Bochner's work (or LeWitt's, or Smithson's, or early Lawrence Weiner's)^{xxviii} was located between these poles: between a purely linguistic construct and an activity that claimed to have achieved an absolute motivation of process, an art that followed from the necessities of materials deployed by a body, an art devoid of "form" (intention). Bochner's alignments of procedure and product, sign and referent, in uneasy equivalences—his refusal to present language *apart* from its objects—contested both of these models. Just as he suggested there is no "conceptualism" (our thought develops *in* sensual experience, in the things we touch, see, describe),^{xxix} so, too, a pure materialism would seem unachievable: We don't *just* throw felt or lead, we *conceive* of these materials *as* materials (as "felt," "lead"), socially *organized*

materials; and we use them according to preconceived notions (“hanging,” “stacking”). Language intervenes. In other words, Bochner maintained a position of *deliberate in-betweenness*.



Mel Bochner, *Axiom of Indifference (South Side)* (1973)

In a world which is probably not more dehumanized than ever before, awareness of distance is a principal factor in functioning. Between objects are distances, not separations. That suggests a detachment which more or less excludes a formal approach.

—Mel Bochner^{xxx}

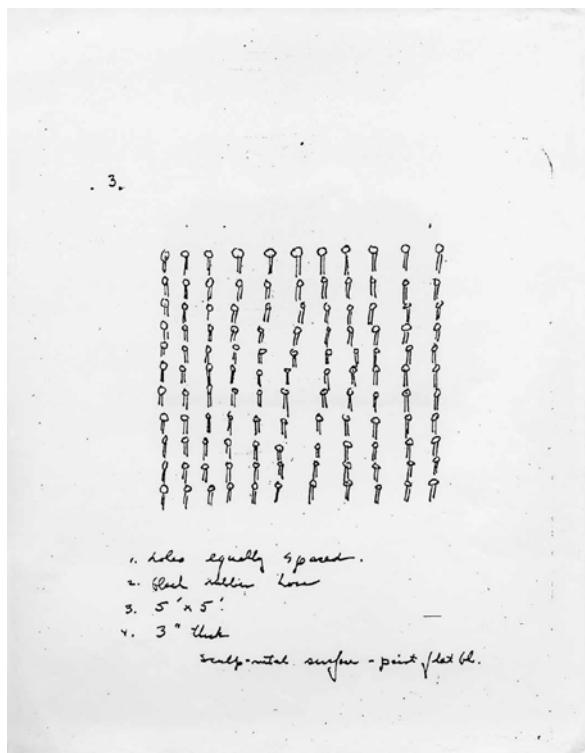
Why discomfort? Why must the viewer of the *Working Drawings* bend over the plinths to decipher each page? Why must he or she shuttle from one side of *Axiom of Indifference* (1972–73) to the other in a futile attempt to recall the pennies’ positions?

The *Working Drawings*, we have seen, did not so much present “art” as its methods; the works of Flavin, Judd, and Hesse were not experienced firsthand but from a *distance*. “My project has always been a kind of research based on bracketing,” Bochner has recently said. “When you bracket you set something aside, you don’t eliminate it.”^{xxxii} To bracket, to set aside, is to detach the object from its usual context to render it unfamiliar. This is, of course, the avant-gardist strategy of estrangement, whose most articulate spokesman was Bertolt Brecht.^{xxxiii} What was the appeal of Brecht’s discourse for the young artist? “Detachment,” Bochner wrote, “excludes a formal approach.” Now, formalism, for artists emerging in New York during the 1960s, meant one thing: Greenbergian formalism, the call for each medium to secure its discrete “area of competence,” articulated in the idealist terms of an asymptotic pursuit of the medium’s “essence.” In contrast, the formalism of Brecht was a materialist model, a laying bare of constructive and semantic techniques. The spectator, rendered conscious of these mechanisms, was thus directed to engage in a broader project of critical analysis and social transformation.^{xxxiii}

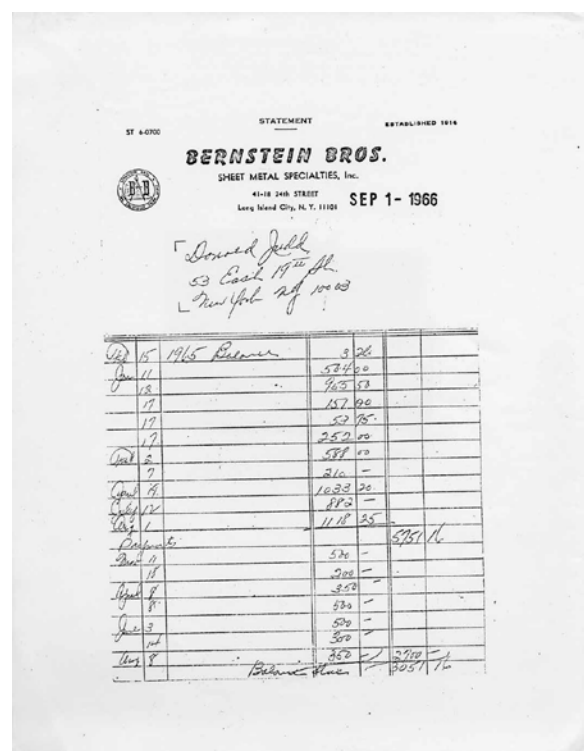


Installation view of *Working Drawings And Other Visible Things On Paper Not Necessarily Meant To Be Viewed As Art*, School of Visual Arts, New York, 1966

Bochner's fixation on process is well described as Brechtian. In his work, one formalism has replaced another: Instead of drawings we have *working* drawings; instead of painting—a painting that explores its conventions within the medium—a *Theory of Painting* (1969–70). Formalism, in Greenberg's sense, is located in an object directed to “eyesight alone”; works of art are to be looked at, not “thought” about.^{xxxiv} Whereas Bochner *solicits* the viewer's thought; he exposes the work as a semantic construct, weaves it through a discursive and institutional web (hence the diagrams of the Xerox machine, the gallery).^{xxxv} And this shift from “work” to “frame” was accomplished by a displacement (mediated by minimalism and the proto-conceptualism of Johns, Morris, LeWitt) from Greenberg's empirical model of vision (better known as “opticality”) to a vision located in a mobile, bending body, a body that simultaneously (impossibly) attempts to read and see.



Mel Bochner, Xerox of Eva Hesse Drawing (1966)



Mel Bochner, Xerox of Donald Judd Drawing (1966)



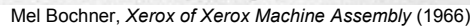
Installation view of *Working Drawings And Other Visible Things On Paper Not Necessarily Meant To Be Viewed As Art*, School of Visual Arts, New York, 1966

At a certain point, the object recedes from view; the spectator gives up. Distance—the distance of Brecht, modernist distance—breaks down. The *Working Drawings* do not picture artistic process from a place of confident detachment; images of images of projects, they stake out a further, less assured position, a second degree. In the photo pieces, perspectival grids have been photographed, then rephotographed; the viewer of *Axiom of Indifference* never sees the work whole. In Bochner, defamiliarization has gone “too far.” He frames the work, then frames the *frame*. In the course of these transformations, the “object” itself is lost. This dissolution of distance after the establishment of an initial distance or single point of view, this *shallowness*, as Fredric Jameson has described it, we might characterize—now that the excitement of using the term has gone, now that it too is historical—as “postmodern.” For this was Bochner’s word.^{xxxvi} The postmodern, in his sense, denoted this shallow visuality, this displacement from the object of modernism (the work that explores the conditions of the medium) and from a vision located in a confident “eye.” The medium itself has become an object of reflection: It is reframed, inhabited, its conventions exposed from within. As Craig Owens once observed:

This deconstructive impulse is characteristic of postmodernist art in general and must be distinguished from the self-critical tendency of modernism. Modernist theory presupposes . . . that the object itself can be substituted (metaphorically) for its referent. This is the rhetorical strategy of self-reference upon which modernism is based. . . . When the postmodernist work speaks of itself, it is no longer to proclaim its autonomy, its self-sufficiency, its transcendence; rather, it is to narrate its own contingency, insufficiency, lack of transcendence.^{xxxvii}

“To see one’s own sight,” wrote Robert Smithson, “means visible blindness.” In the double degree proposed by the *Working Drawings*, distance collapses; clarity gives way to confusion; the upright

views and reframings, further removals, “infinite myopia.”^{xxxviii}



- i From the transcript of Elayne Varian's interview with the artist, March 1969.
- ii The history recounted here was provided by Bochner in an interview with the author in New York on January 9, 1995.
- iii "There was a sense that these drawings were not 'drawings,' that they didn't qualify as something self-sufficient. Drawings, up to that point, had to be at least considered sketches. These were *beneath* sketches" (reported by Bochner in a telephone conversation with the author, January 28, 1995).
- iv The benefits of this approach have been demonstrated in Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "From the Aesthetic of Administration to Institutional Critique (Some Aspects of Conceptual Art 1962–1969)," in the exhibition catalogue *L'art conceptuel, une perspective* (Paris: Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1990), 41–53.
- v Quoted in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *Mel Bochner: Fontana's Light, Omaggio a Lucio Fontana*, exh. cat. (Milan: Studio Casoli, 1991), 20.
- vi Mel Bochner, "Primary Structures," *Arts Magazine* 40 (June 1966): 32.
- vii Letter to the author, January 13, 1992.
- viii Ibid. Bochner has attested to the impact of these examples: "The strongest influences on my work and thinking during 1966–1968 were Jasper Johns (the *Number* paintings), R. Rauschenberg (the *White* paintings, *Factum 1 + Factum 2*), Frank Stella (modular series like *Running V's*), and Dan Flavin (*The Nominal Three*)."
- ix "Specific Objects," *Arts Yearbook* 8 (1965), reprinted in Donald Judd, *Complete Writings 1959–1975* (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975), 183.
- x Ibid., 184.
- xi Letter to the author, January 13, 1992.
- xii Mel Bochner, "The Serial Attitude," *Artforum* 6 (December 1967): 73. His earlier essays on this subject include "Art in Process—Structures," *Arts Magazine* 40 (September/October 1966): 38–39; "Systemic," *Arts Magazine* 41 (November 1966): 40; and "Serial Art Systems: Solipsism," *Arts Magazine* 41 (summer 1967): 39–43.

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- xiii This argument was critiqued, rather unpersuasively, in John Coplans, "Serial Imagery," *Artforum* 7 (October 1968): 34–43.
- xiv The discourse of the "minimal," as it developed during the 1960s, is the subject of my doctoral dissertation, "The Genealogy of Minimalism: Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris" (Johns Hopkins University, 1995).
- xv Quoted in "The New Sculpture," transcript of a symposium on *Primary Structures* held at the Jewish Museum, New York, May 2, 1966. The transcript is located in the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
- xvi "Recentness of Sculpture," in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 253.
- xvii Mel Bochner, "Primary Structures," 34.
- xviii On the shiny, auratic surfaces of Judd's works, see Robert Smithson, "Donald Judd," in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 21–23, and Rosalind Krauss, "Allusion and Illusion in Donald Judd," *Artforum* 4 (May 1966): 24–26. It should be noted that today's understanding of Duchamp's readymade as having posed a challenge to the auratic art-commodity was not held by the circle in question: Andre and Smithson perceived Duchamp as a commodity *fetishist*, an alchemist whose relocation of the readymade to the gallery conferred upon it the very aura it had lacked. See "Robert Smithson on Duchamp: An Interview with Moira Roth," in Nancy Holt, *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 197–99, and Carl Andre, "Against Duchamp," *Praxis* 1 (spring 1975): 115.
- xix The potential risk of the "working drawing" became apparent when the collector Giuseppe di Panza took production into his own hands, executing his own versions of minimal sculpture from drawings without the artists' consultation. On this controversy, see Donald Judd, "Una Stanza per Panza," Parts I–IV, *Kunst Intern* (May, July, September, and November 1990).
- xx Eva Hesse describing her sculpture *Addendum* on an acoustiguide tape (November 1967), quoted in Lucy Lippard, *Eva Hesse* (New York: New York University Press, 1976), 96. Hesse's contribution to the *Working Drawings* appears to have been a study for either *Iterate* or *Study for Sculpture* ("Woman's Museum"), illustrated in Bill Barrette, *Eva Hesse Sculpture* (New York: Timken Publishers, Inc., 1989), 119, 121.
- xxi *Valley of the Dolls*, Jacqueline Susann's potboiler narrating the rise and fall of three "career girls" addicted to psychotropic drugs, or "dolls," was published in February 1966; by December (the date of the *Working Drawings*) it was in its 11th printing. For a historical overview of the rise of drug culture during the 1960s, see Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987).
- xxii The project, which first appeared as a text in *Aspen* magazine, was presented in the double format of an invitation and realized structure for LeWitt's one-person show at Dwan Gallery in Los Angeles in April 1967. It also appeared as a model (Set A only) in Bochner's and Elayne Varian's *Art in Series* show at Finch College in November 1967.
- xxiii Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," in *Sol LeWitt*, ed. Alicia Legg (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1978), 166.
- xxiv The distinction between the two aspects of conceptualism elucidated here was first proposed in Rosalind E. Krauss, "Sense and Sensibility: Reflections on Post '60s Sculpture," *Artforum* 12 (November 1973): 43–53. On the "irrational" character of serial conceptualism, see Krauss's "LeWitt in Progress," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 245–58.
- xxv See "Anti Form," *Artforum* 6 (April 1968), reprinted in Robert Morris, *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 41, 43.
- xxvi Ibid., 46. For a more detailed account of these processes, see Morris's "Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making: The Search for the Motivated," *Artforum* 8 (April 1970), reprinted in *ibid.*, 71–94.
- xxvii See Richard Armstrong and Richard Marshall, eds., *The New Sculpture 1965–1975: Between Geometry and Gesture* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1990), the catalogue of a historical show that more or less replicated the materialist process formulation of Morris, which this institution had already canonized in its 1969 exhibition *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials*. In fact, the term "Postminimalism," as proposed by Robert Pincus-Witten in 1968, had been intended to suggest the variety of directions of work emerging in the wake of Minimalism (just as, by historical analogy, "Postimpressionism" suggested the opening of possibilities implicit in Impressionism). Thus, in addition to the "anti-form" work of Hesse, Morris, [Barry] Le Va, Serra, [Linda] Benglis, [Alan] Saret, Nauman, [Richard] Tuttle, and Sonnier, the serial or "information-based abstraction" of LeWitt, Bochner, Smithson, and [Dorothea] Rockburne was also implied. But then Pincus-Witten himself predicted the "reification" of this construction into a reduced style-label. See "The Seventies," in Robert Pincus-Witten, *Eye to Eye: Twenty Years of Art Criticism* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984), 123–30.
- xxviii On the emergence of practices operating within a site of overlap between physical matter or place and linguistic and/or photographic and filmic representation during the 1960s, see Craig Owens, "Earthwords," *October* 10 (fall 1979): 120–30, reprinted in Craig Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 40–51.
- xxix "I never really considered myself a conceptual artist because I cannot separate conception from perception. . . . What interests me is the way in which ideas break down." Mel Bochner, statement in *Mel Bochner*, exh. cat. (Tokyo: Gallery 360o, 1993).
- xxx Mel Bochner, "Art in Process—Structures," 38.
- xxxi Quoted from my interview with the artist, published as "Mel Bochner: The Gallery Is a Theater," *Flash Art* 27 (summer 1994): 100.
- xxxii Bochner discovered the writings of Brecht during his student days at Carnegie Tech.
- xxxiii On the distinction between the two formalisms—the idealist model of Greenberg and the materialist tradition of the Russian formalists, Brecht, and Roland Barthes—see Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), xvi–xx. Bois's numerous texts on the strategy of estrangement (which inspired the present analysis) include "El Lissitzky: Radical Reversibility," *Art in America* 76 (April 1988): 160–81; "Ryman's Tact," *October* 19 (winter 1981): 93–104; and "The Semiology of Cubism," in *Picasso and Braque: A Symposium*, ed. Lynn Zelevansky (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992), 169–208, which discusses how this device (the "first" degree) had already become automatized within early Modernism, requiring—on the part of the Russian formalists—the formulation of a second model of estrangement, a modernist "second degree."

xxxiv Greenberg's formulation of opticality—a perceptual experience located in “eyesight alone”—is presented in “The New Sculpture” in his *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 139–45. His statement that he didn't want to “think” in front of works of art was personally recalled by Bochner. A second account of this meeting of Greenberg and Bochner appears in Robert Pincus-Witten, *Eye to Eye*, 218–19.

xxxv On this transition from “work” to “frame,” which would culminate in the *Measurement* works, see my “Bochner's *Measurement Series*,” in *Kontext Kunst*, ed. Peter Weibel (Cologne: DuMont Buchverlag, 1994), 129–33.

xxxvi “For lack of a better term, I would refer to this new period as ‘postmodernism’ (could anyone ten years ago have imagined that ‘modern art’ would become a period style?). ‘Postmodernism’ begins with Jasper Johns, who first rejected sense-data and the singular point-of-view as the basis for his art, and treated art as critical investigation. Johns interrogated the phenomenological condition of painting, but went further by injecting doubt into the deadening self-belief of art-thinking at that time. Most essentially he raised the troubling question of the relationship of language to art. His paintings demonstrated that neither was reducible to the other's terms. It is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of images, what we are saying. After Johns we can never again slide surreptitiously from the space of statements to the space of images: In other words, fold one over the other as if they were equivalents” (Mel Bochner, “ICA Lecture,” unpublished manuscript of a lecture delivered at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London, June 1971).

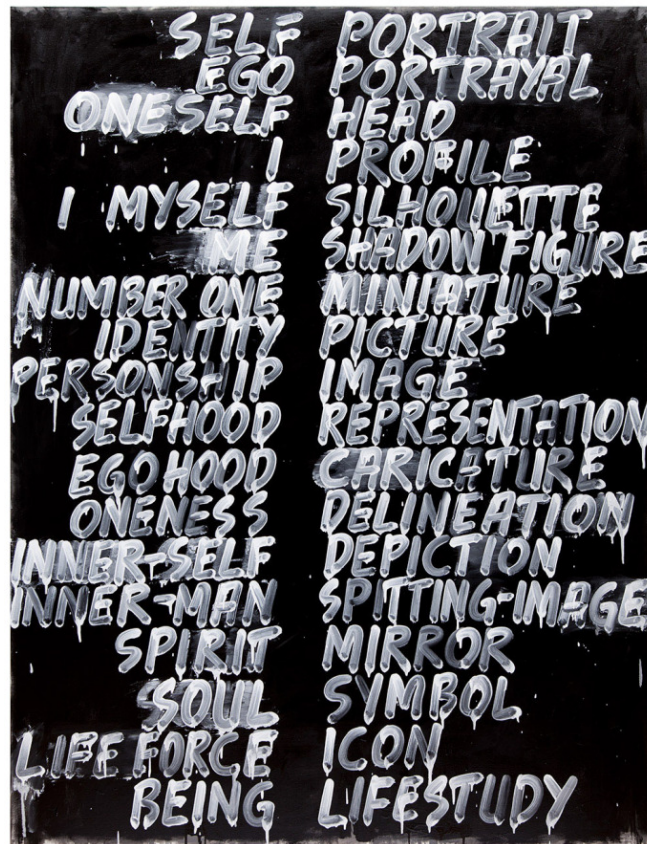
xxxvii “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism, Part 2,” *October* 13 (summer 1980), reprinted in Craig Owens, *Beyond Recognition*, 85. On the relation of Bochner's work to Kant's theory of reason as appropriated by Greenberg, see my interview with Bochner, 100.

xxxviii “Interpolation of the Enantiomorphic Chambers,” in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 39. Smithson's *Enantiomorphic Chambers* (1965)—reliefs that each set up two mirrors in a mutual reflection (thus rendering the viewer incapable of seeing his own image)—could also be discussed in terms of a logic of the “second degree.”

THE NEW YORKER

MEL BOCHNER'S THESAURUS PAINTINGS

By Anna Altman — 17 June 2014



Self/Portrait, 2013

In 1964, the young artist Mel Bochner, who had just arrived in New York from Pittsburgh, visited the Jewish Museum to see Jasper Johns's "White Flag." At the museum, he ran into a former classmate from Carnegie Tech, who was working at the museum as a guard. Bochner was unemployed and looking for work, and he asked his friend whether there might be a position for him, too. A guard had quit the day before, his friend said, so Bochner may as well inquire at the office on his way out. He did, and was hired that day. (Years later, Bochner learned that the guard he'd replaced was Brice Marden.)

Bochner spent the next year as a museum guard. It wasn't a bad gig: back in the nineteen-sixties, Bochner recalled, "the Jewish Museum was the place to be." The Whitney was "stuck in the thirties," "MOMA was asleep," and "the Guggenheim showed only work from Europe." But the Jewish Museum displayed the big new things in American art: Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Richard Diebenkorn. During the day, Bochner watched over paintings by Philip Guston and Kenneth Noland. After work, he went home to an apartment on First Avenue, which he rented for twenty-one dollars a month; he painted all night and caught a few hours of sleep before returning to work the next day. Exhausted, he found a nook at the museum where he liked to nap. One afternoon, he was discovered sleeping there and was fired on the spot. He wasn't too regretful, though: losing the job pushed him to make money writing art reviews for two dollars and fifty cents a pop, which, in turn, led to his first teaching job.

Last month, the Jewish Museum opened a survey of Bochner's work, called "Strong Language," which focusses primarily on his word paintings and sketches. As a young artist, Bochner made small portraits of his artist friends on graph paper: for Eva Hesse, a spiral of synonyms beginning with "WRAP-UP" and continuing on through "SWATHE," "CONFINE," and "ENSCONCE"; for Robert Smithson, a list, in two columns, headlined "REPETITION," and including "REPRODUCTION," "DUPLICATION," "REDOUBLING," "RECURRENCE," and "REDUNDANCY."

Over the years, Bochner's interest in words, lists, and synonyms developed into a set of iconic works, often called thesaurus paintings. These are series of words, set against bright colors, in declarative hues of sky blue, Kelly green, and orange: "AMAZING! AWESOME! BREATHTAKING!", "NOTHING, NEGATION, NONEXISTENCE, NOT-BEING, NONE."

Especially appropriate for the Jewish Museum is a Bochner litany, in yellow paint on a black background, of words selected from the nineteen-fifties volume of "The Joys of Yiddish"—"KIBBITZER, KVETCHER, K'NOCKER, NUDZH"—and one of words from an anti-Semitic Web site: "JEW, HEBREW, SEMITE." In a work commissioned by the museum to welcome visitors to its lobby, a field of gloopy bubble-letters spell out the same word over and over: "BLAH, BLAH, BLAH."

Bochner is more vocal about his painting process than he is about interpreting his work. He is more interested, he says, in seeing what responses the paintings elicit. Among the most surprising reactions came from the National Gallery's museum guards, who are Iraq War and Vietnam War veterans. "One

of the guards came up to the curator and said that my show had meant a great deal to all of them, because of this painting,” Bochner said, gesturing toward “Die,” a thesaurus painting against a Pepto-Bismol-pink background that begins, “DIE, DECEASE, EXPIRE, PERISH, SUCCUMB, PASS AWAY.” “Some of them had looked at it and cried,” Bochner said. “Now, I couldn’t have anticipated that response. I never thought, What would a war veteran think looking at a painting that said, ‘Buy the farm, cash in your chips, kick the bucket?’” He paused. “You put these things out in the world and you just back off, let people make of it what they want.”

I asked Bochner if it meant anything to have a retrospective at the museum where he’d first worked when he moved to New York. “No,” he said, without hesitation. The museum had been renovated since he had worked there. “The spaces are all different. All the things that were unique to it are gone, so it’s like coming into any museum.” Besides, he went on, “you reach a point in your life where a lot of the people you’ve known or cared about are no longer alive. It would have another meaning if those people I shared the history of that moment with were still with us. But, because they’re not, there’s no nostalgia.”

If there is a special pleasure in the exhibition, it is having all of Bochner’s work, from the past five decades, in one place. Arranging a retrospective is a real hassle: there’s the work of tracking the pieces; persuading owners to loan the work; arranging shipment, insurance, and delivery. But, once the art arrives and is hung on the walls, there’s nothing like it.

That morning, Bochner had arrived early, before anyone else. “This is what it’s all about, because I have it all to myself. I can see where I’ve really accomplished something or where I didn’t quite make it.” He can take in each individual piece quietly, at his leisure. “It’s all the product of one’s own mind, but as you’re doing it you’re just making one thing at a time. It’s like a beaver going through a piece of wood, and the chips are flying. But now you turn the film backward, and the chips are all coming back, and you get this one moment where you can look at it and try to feel it really deeply. *This* is what I’ve done. When you think of all the artists in the world, it’s a very rare opportunity. I cherish it.”